

RAIN, RAIN, COME AGAIN

A novella by Papri Rudra

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Dedication

Dedicated to all the story tellers who have regaled, mesmerized and overwhelmed me with their tales all my life.

Every life is a tale and there is tale weaver hidden in each one of us.

The tale weavers

The scenery, as seen from the terrace, was beautiful. It would have gladdened the heart of the most unimaginative of men. No wonder, that to Atul, a painter by hobby, it appealed pleasantly.

There were the grayish blue hills, slowly engulfing the setting sun and the rich vegetation, dotted with beautiful flowers. The prettiest however, was the waterfall, hugging the hill side, like a stream of pure milk. There was nothing roaring or aggressive about it but like every natural spring, it had an urgency about the way, its water flowed into the river below. The river also, as seen in the valley below, had the quintessential hurriedness of a mountain stream. All these perfections of nature, coupled with a soft, cool wind and the serenity of the dusk, gave the place a fairyland like elegance that genuinely pleased the senses.

Atul felt a sense of serenity, long missed in the city life he led. Skeptical at first, he was now glad of his new possession. A house, nestled in such lovely surroundings might not have found a place in his investments as such but a legacy was, of course, a different matter. He had been surprised when informed that his uncle Gopal, who had died earlier that year, had left this piece of property to him, but now having inspected it, he was sufficiently pleased. Hari, the middle aged caretaker of the house seemed reliable and the house though not too spacious, was just the right size. He had no idea what seemed so right about it, but it did and Atul was not the type to question his impressions unnecessarily. He made the necessary enquiries, settled the required arrangements and reached his decision, which was to maintain the house as a weekend getaway, for his friends and family. Of course, his wife, who had not been able to accompany him this time, might wish some changes in the kitchen and geysers would have to be fitted in the bathrooms but, otherwise it looked like a sensible proposition

The meal cooked by the caretaker's wife Nadia was simple and tasty. Atul dined early and decided to go to bed. His room had been suitably prepared by Hari.

As he was proceeding towards his room, the sound of thunder reached his ears, followed almost immediately by the swish of the pouring rain.

"Is it normal to have rains at this time of year, Hari?" It was late November.

"Rainfall here is rather erratic, Sahib. It will stop almost as suddenly as it has started", was Hari's quiet reply.

His next words surprised Atul. "It is a good omen, Sahib. In these parts, they say that if it rains on the first night, when a new master enters the house, the house blesses him with joy and prosperity. I hope it will prove true for you." Hari's voice was sincere. There was also a note of sanctity in his voice, as if uttering a holy incantation.

Atul smiled and gazed out of the window. The rain was coming in thick torrents. A sense of expectation swept over him.

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Manjula looked around her with satisfaction. The place was now perfect. Her careful planning had struck just the right amount of balance between modernism and old elegance. The pretty little house had been made sufficiently comfortable to house a group of city-bred people without losing its rustic charm. Of course, that room at the top was still not completely organized but that could be seen to later on.

With the pleasant tiredness that comes with the knowledge of having achieved something, she sank into the comfortable sofa and closed her eyes. A mild drowsiness flooded over her senses. She could have gone up to her bedroom, for a short nap but decided not to. The old sofa was good enough for an undisturbed siesta. Not that she was planning to sleep now. Still, it would be a couple of hours, before Atul and the others arrived. She might as well grab a bit of rest now. With a group of college friends, about to spend a week together, late nights would obviously be the norm, not the exception.

Manjula smiled as she thought of the people, expected to be her guests for the approaching week. There was the romantic Kajal and her amused, no-nonsense husband Kunal. Then there was Sweta, intelligent and well-read, with her uncanny ability to sum up any complex situation or people into the minimum possible words. They were all rather different from each other and yet the best of friends.

Manjula herself had always been considered a very sensible and balanced person. Her tall, well-proportioned figure, the soft mass of shoulder length jet-black hair and the even-toned light brown complexion seemed to radiate an air of restfulness. Her features, though beautifully shaped had certain softness about them. As if someone had set out to chisel something sharp but decided to blunt the edges after all. This balance of softness and angularity had, on one hand, diminished her literal attractiveness but at the same time, imparted a lovable sweetness to her overall personality. When one looked at Manjula, one always got the impression that they were seeing not just a face but an entire entity. In other words, she was beautiful without being a beauty. This solidness of her personality was one of her vital assets, as a loved school teacher. Her students, mostly adolescents, simply adored her. For them, Manjula madam was more than a teacher. She was an icon of perfection, without the dullness of the over-virtuous. Yet, in some distraught moments, Manjula ruefully wondered if she was not too placid for life's wonders. Like every woman, praised for her maturity, she had her moments when something rebellious stirred up in her. She worried that life's currents would pass her by and that she would never experience real passion that made life so memorable. In other words, she sometimes felt the urge to step out of the backstage and grab the limelight.

Atul, on the other hand was exactly the opposite. He was the genuine feeler, an admirer of all that was wild, passionate and unpredictable. Though pleasantly social, he observed enough of his surroundings, to form a well of impressions inside him. He loved to paint, read books and was jolly to be with.

In a strange way, Atul and Manjula were more alike each other than anyone guessed. They both had a deep thirst for experiencing all that life had to offer. Manjula, the more objective thinker of the two, had often wondered as what exactly had drawn them to each other. Had it been the outward dissimilarities or their inner similarities?

Eventually, she opened her eyes and sat up on the sofa. She felt refreshed and very eager, though she had no idea what this eagerness was for. Her preparations as a hostess were over for now. She picked up the book, lying on the Centre table and walked out to the terrace. It was not dark yet. There was no other sound except the hurried sound of the waterfall and the river far below. Settling into a comfortable chair, she opened the book and began to read. The book was good one but she found herself thinking that it was too slow. Something in her seemed to desire more action, more life. She kept the book down and walked up to the railing.

A sharp gust of wind brushed across her smooth skin. Dark clouds were gathering in the sky again. Perhaps, it would rain again. The slight chilliness of the air made her shiver. It also made her feel delightfully alive, as if the wind, like a naughty child had whispered a secret in her willing ears and then run off. Yes, she was sure. There had definitely been a whisper and the whisperer, she felt, would repeat the exercise, until she had grasped the secret.

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“Let us all sit in the hall and chat. The night absolutely demands it”, Kajal declared.

Dinner was over. It had been a delicious spread, and everyone had eaten well. Even Sweta, usually chided for her bird-like appetite, had helped herself to second servings. The fresh country air and two days of peaceful, unhindered holiday had invigorated everyone.

To Kajal’s delight, it was raining again, thick and fast. There was no sluggishness in its fall. In fact, it had rained a good deal in the last two days but it had offended no one. The village was a pretty one but there weren’t many places to visit as such. As Atul said, the best view, as seen from their terrace, was already at their disposal. The hills, the waterfall and the river in the valley below had an air of liveliness about them. To see these beauties of nature, through the veil of white, sparkling rain was even more breathtaking.

“Sure. Unless someone is tired and wants to go to bed right away”, Manjula agreed. She, by uttering that last part of the sentence, fulfilled her duty as the caring hostess.

They assembled in the drawing room, settling down comfortably on the soft Kashmiri carpet, on the floor.

“A nice house, this one. I am glad you invited us to spend the week here. Thanks.” said Sweta.

“You are welcome! Though the city is better in winter, than the rest of the year, it is always nice to get away for a while.” Atul said.

“Far from the madding crowd!” commented Kunal, in his amused voice.

“Yes, just the place where you sit down with friends and share stories, all through the night”, went on Kajal dreamily.

“Hmm! Spooky ones. Full of ghosts and strange happenings”, Kunal said, imitating the hushed, dramatic tone, reserved for narrating of ghost stories.

“Must you be so cynical always, Kunal?” Kajal said with slight irritation.

“Why! I am just mentioning the common theory. Is it not always on such rainy nights when spooky things seem to have happened? The super natural elements, in stories, do exhibit such marked preference for rainy or stormy nights?” Kunal defended himself.

Kajal said nothing. Instead Manjula spoke up. “Yes, Kunal. I agree with you. Stories about the supernatural have a way of picking upon the rainy or stormy nights. Maybe, it helps to create the sense of drama and intensity.”

“Dramatic, yes. But have you ever noticed how this dramatic, always seems to be associated with some pain or cruelty or hatred? Very rarely, is it believed to have arisen out of something positive, such as true love or genuine kindness.” Sweta said thoughtfully.

Everyone looked at her. So, she in an explanatory tone, continued. “Many stories talk of houses or places having a significant atmosphere, due to some drama that had been played out there. But have you noticed, how most of these atmospheres are supposed to be of fear or hatred or depression? Some cruel or sad thing that happened is supposed to be responsible for having created these so-called sinister atmospheres. It makes one wonder, as whether only the negative emotions are capable of creating atmospheres that linger on.”

“That is an interesting point indeed. Now that you say, I must confess that I have never heard a story about a house or place having an inbuilt atmosphere of happiness, though instances of the contrary are numerous.” Atul muttered thoughtfully.

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean.” Sweta replied. “Can any of us imagine a story exactly the anti-thesis of, say, a story like that of Daphne Du Maurier’s novel ‘Rebecca’? Why is there no story ever heard or written about a place, where something really wonderful happened and as a result of that, it acquired a joyous atmosphere that lingered on, even after the drama was over?”

“Almost all over the world, you will find instances that if something bad happens at some place; some remnant of it lingers on about the place. Why cannot the opposite happen too? Why cannot places, where something good happens, acquire a correspondingly happy or positive atmosphere? Aren’t love and goodness supposed to be stronger emotions than hate or fear?” It was quite a long speech for, the usually thoughtful, Sweta.

“I know why you are saying so, Sweta”, said Kajal, in a low voice. “You also have felt something, haven’t you?”

“Felt what?” asked Manjula.

“Felt a kind of atmosphere about this house. There is something that seems to hang about the air. Nothing that I can put my finger on, but I can feel its presence” answered Kajal, shifting her gaze from Sweta to Manjula.

“There you go again. This place is just fine.” Kunal said, giving his wife a firm look.

“Of course it is. I never said that anything is wrong but there is something I cannot grasp.” murmured Kajal. Kunal would have spoken but Kajal’s next words rendered everyone speechless. “This place, unlike all other places, which have this so-called atmosphere, does not have anything brooding or sad about it. Instead, it seems just the opposite. It has an *anti-Rebecca* atmosphere, as if it has experienced not an intense grief but an intense joy. This is what is so puzzling.”

Kajal had directed her gaze directly at Sweta, while uttering these last words. The latter, remained silent for a while and then nodded her head, slowly. “Yes, Kajal. This is what I have felt and that is what has puzzled me.”

“Oh well, that is a good thing then. Interesting because it is different from the usual fiction and heartening because it is positive in its nature.” concluded Atul with a laugh.

“I will tell you, why you find this disappointing. Evil, grief and all that is negative are always spicier. They add zing to life while the good, the pure, for all their greatness are bland. It is the sense of zing which feed our sense of excitement. So, we look for them, in our stories and histories.” replied Kunal, resuming his amused and confident approach.

“Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know as what gives this house, its particular atmosphere. Positive or negative, I would either way, like to know its secret.” Kajal’s voice had once again become dreamy.

Manjula had listened to all this with a breathless attention. She too had felt something but had refused to admit any such thing, even in her own heart. Practical as she was, in her thinking, yet she had not been insensitive to these vague hints, which lingered in this house. Now, she found in Kajal and Sweta’s words, a resonance of her own perceptions.

“Secret”, murmured Atul thoughtfully. “Well, it might have secrets, or it might have just plain, simple legends about it.”

“Yes, it may. After all, you do not know much about this area yet. It may be worthwhile finding out.” Kajal went on enthusiastically. “For example, is it a very old house or has it been built recently? Even if the house is a new one, there may have been a lot of stories

about the place as such. The plot is a kind of secluded one, you can see. It is situated higher up than any of the nearest properties.”

“Oh well, you can embark on your research tomorrow. I am sure the caretaker fellow will be able to tell you all that is to be known about this place.” Kunal said placidly. His voice was affectionate but also slightly bored.

Manjula, the eternal observer, found herself wondering about the laws that controlled the attractions between a man and a woman. Kajal was everything that Kunal was not. She had a lovely oval face, framed by curly, black hair and the most beautiful pair of eyes you could find, contrasting with the most ordinary features of Kunal. While Kajal had the enthusiasm of a child, Kunal made fun of almost every romantic notion that Kajal could think of. Yet, from the first, Kajal had been the one and only girl in matter-of-fact Kunal’s life. Maybe, the opposites did attract each other.

“Why wait for tomorrow? We can begin our research right now.” Sweta offered. “The caretaker fellow is doing something in the kitchen. Isn’t he, Manju?”

“Yes, he is. I will call him if you want.”

Hari was eventually summoned, and the important question put to him. He turned out to be quite knowledgeable about the required history.

After ten minutes of rigorous questioning, he was granted permission to leave. The gist of the grilling was this.

The house was actually a very old one, going back more than a hundred and fifty years. It had changed hands several times and got modified through each of these changes. The foundations seemed to have been a solid one, for the addition and subtraction of new portions, had not disturbed its basic stability. The first time, it had been a small but rather pretty house, for it had belonged to none other, but the king, of these areas. The surrounding areas being jungles then, it had been a resting place for the then reigning princes, during their hunting trips. One prince, in particular, believed to have been especially handsome, was said to have fallen in love with a village maiden, during one of these trips. At some point of time, this house had been gifted by the then king to one of his trusted men, whose family had resided here for a couple of generations. As always happens in such stories, the family whose home it was, continued to have rather interesting adventures, almost in every generation, so that the house always remained an important strong hold of the area. Finally, the family dwindled away or maybe simply got absorbed in the relentless flow of time, so that their names and adventures were but also gradually forgotten. This seemed to mark the end of the era for which, the house had any interesting stories. Soon after, with the collapse of the monarchies, it had passed into the control of the British. There was no intriguing tale about the period, when it remained under the British control and appeared in market, for sale, only after India’s independence. Passing through a series of buyers, for its location was appreciated as indeed picturesque; it had eventually passed on to Uncle Gopal, through one of his wife’s relatives and through that worthy gentleman, to Atul

presently. Hari also mentioned that around these parts, the house was locally referred to as the 'house on the hill', the reason for which, no longer existed in anyone's living memory. There had been a strange pattern associated with its inheritance also. It had never passed down through the expected channels of inheritance, such as from father to son. Whoever inherited it, usually, did so without having expected it ever.

This last point intrigued Atul. He had considered it odd even then, when first apprised of the news, but now it struck him that Uncle Gopal had three children of his own and as far as he knew, had always been on perfect terms with all three of them. Yet, in an obscure fashion, he had chosen none of them but Atul, a distant nephew, to leave this house to. During his lifetime, Uncle Gopal had seemed to nurture only the usual amount of affection for Atul, nothing extravagant, so the reason for this generosity was kind of unexpected. In other words, it kept up with the tradition of the house that whoever inherited it, usually, did so without having expected it.

"So ladies, such is the legend of the 'House of happiness'!" was Kunal's comment, in a mockingly dramatic tone, after Hari had taken his leave.

Kunal's comment, however, elicited no response at all. Everybody else seemed to have suddenly become very thoughtful. The silence was finally broken by Sweta. She had stood up and walked up to the window, while Hari had been narrating the tale. Typical to her nature, she seemed quite wrapped up in watching the rain outside the windows, while her attention was intently focused on Hari's strong voice.

"Maybe it is the rain. Rain, which is doing this to us. The odd thing is that I do not want this rain to stop." Sweta said, still gazing out. She seemed to be speaking more to herself than anyone else.

Sweta's slim and not so tall figure would have, perhaps given awkwardness to any other girl's personality. Sweta however, was anything but awkward. Her shiny mass of hair covered a most calm and sensitive mind. Contrary to her name, which meant 'white', she was rather dark. In fact a deep, chocolaty brown was the more apt description for her complexion. Her features, like her mind, were sharp and well defined. Yet, a careful look into her eyes gave the impression that beneath all that composure laid a lot of emotions-feelings, passion and sensitivity awaiting the right discoverer.

"Yes, I too feel the same. It is the Rain!" Manjula said quietly but firmly.

The room was completely silent, except for the sound of falling rain outside.

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"Wow! That smells great." exclaimed Kajal, sniffing the delicious smell, wafting out from the kitchen.

“Hmm! Looks like I am going to enjoy the dinner.” agreed Kunal.

It had been raining more and more, since the night, Hari had told them the story of the house. So, in accordance with the weather, the menu had been decided to comprise of just Khichdi and deep fried *pakodas*. Nadia had been duly instructed and now everyone was ready to taste Nadia’s cooking.

“The rain does not seem to have any intention to stop. It is just going on and on and on.” commented Atul, after they had finished their dinner and settled down, in the hall, with their cups of coffee.

“Yes, but I love it. In the city, when the same happens, it just gets on my nerves. Here, I do not mind it so much. In fact, I am enjoying the rain.” said Sweta.

“That is because here, you do not have to wade through streams of water to commute to your office. It is a holiday, which you are spending with your friends.” said Kunal simply.

Kajal opened her mouth, as if to say something but decided not to. Manjula, whom nothing ever escaped, carried on the conversation. “You are right, Kunal. But still, I beg to differ. Even when one does not have to go out, constant rain can get on one’s nerves.”

“Yes, especially when it contributes to make the weather, so cold.” said Sweta.

“Maybe, we would also have found this rain a spoilsport if we had been mere tourists. Since, we are here for, just some quiet time, we do not mind it that much”, commented Atul sensibly.

“I like it, anyhow.” said Kajal in a slightly defiant tone.

“Well, the anti-Rebecca atmosphere is still holding well then! Well, I am happy for you.” Kunal said in his teasing manner.

“Why don’t we play a little game.” said Sweta suddenly. “We have all heard the story about this house, but we do not know the exact details. Let us try to imagine the events that might have happened. We can all add something to spin a yarn.”

“Not a bad idea. This rain seems to have absolutely no intention of ever stopping. We are stuck inside. We might as well play at story-telling to pass the time.” Manjula said casually. Atul shot a sharp glance at her. Despite the nonchalance in her tone, he was surprised to detect an undercurrent of excitement, in her deep, sensible voice.

“Okay, let us begin then. I think we should start by giving the prince and his beloved names and then move on to imagining the events.” offered Kajal.

Kunal sighed. Obviously, this was not his cup of tea, but the ladies were excited about the idea and even Atul smiled indulgently. Atul was, in fact rather surprised at the change in Manjula. He had never seen Manjula so excited about anything. Her reserve seemed to have fallen away. She looked more alive and involved in the enthusiasm of the moment.

“Now, let me think. What should be the names?” Kajal was already racking her pretty head.

“We can call the Prince, simply as the Prince. Let us give his beloved, the village maiden a nice name.” Manjula suggested.

This was promptly agreed upon and the search for the right name was further pondered on.

“Let us call her Megha. Megha, from the word ‘*Megh*’, which means cloud, in Sanskrit. All this rain! It seems appropriate.” said Sweta.

“Yes, that is perfect. We can pretend that the actual name was something more ornamental, such as Meghmatali or Meghmala but that she was commonly referred to as Megha.” Kajal agreed.

“So here is our Megha, a beautiful village girl. She has to be beautiful of course, so as to be able to catch a prince’s fancy.” added Manjula.

“Yes, indeed. She is fair, but not too fair. She has the perfect shade of brown complexion, with just a drop of whiteness in it and a glowing skin, to make her simply irresistible. She has large, dark, deer-like eyes, with a mischievous smile, lurking in them. Her nose is sharp and her smile, the loveliest thing, in the world.” Kajal’s imagination was in full flow.

“No doubt, very lovely but let us also give her a proud tilt of the head and a confident stride.” urged Sweta.

“Do not forget that she is, after all an ordinary village girl, not a queen, though she has caught the fancy of a prince.” warned Atul.

“Ok, then we can replace the confident stride with a simply jolly and spirited stride. But, please do not make her into a helpless maiden, waiting to be rescued by the handsome prince!” pleaded Sweta.

“Why not give her a more definite entity. She need not be too poor. Maybe, she is the daughter of the village physician. Not too rich but not too poor either. She can then have a more confident, but not too spoiled, nature.” was Manjula’s suggestion.

“Yes, that is better. Meghmala, the beautiful daughter of a village physician, commonly known as Megha! A bright, spirited girl.” summed up Kunal, speaking for the first time, since the storytelling had begun.

“Now, where does she meet the prince for the first time?” Sweta asked practically.

“While, she was returning from the river, one day. The sun was just about to set but there was good deal of light still. She was walking casually towards her home, when up comes the prince, riding on his black horse.” Kajal said.

“Let us try something more unconventional. Maybe, on the outskirts of the dense jungles, where the prince used to hunt! Maybe, she was collecting some kind of wild flowers or fruits, when the prince sees her.”, offered Sweta.

“Ok, so be it then”, Kajal was obviously enjoying herself.

“Well, so she is collecting wild berries, when the prince spots her. She has collected quite a good deal, which she has placed neatly on a slab of stone. He wants to talk to her right away but her next gesture surprises him.”

“Why does she surprise him?” Manjula asked in a genuinely interested voice.

“Because she whistles in a typical manly way and a wild pony comes running out of the woods to join her. This pony, you see, she has made friends with. She pats the animal, kisses its forehead and then offers it some oats, which were tied into a knot, at the end of her *dupatta*.” answered Sweta.

“Not very coy or lady-like, is she? Your Megha?” laughed Atul.

“No, she is rather tomboyish, though she does not let anyone suspect so. She shares the oats with the pony. I say “shares”, because she eats some of them herself too. The prince has been watching her all this while. His own horse had hurt itself, you see, so he had been walking on foot, for a while.”, Sweta explained further.

“Hmm! So, what happens next? The Prince falls in love at first sight, I guess!”, Kunal asked.

Manjula spoke up suddenly. “No! Not yet. He is fascinated though and continues to watch her, from behind a broad oak tree. After a while, she bids goodbye to the pony, which runs back from where he had come. This pony’s name, as given by her is by, the way ‘Meru’. Then, she picks up the wild berries, collected earlier, into a neat knot of her dupatta and then leaves the place. She must go home now. It is getting dark.”

“Does the prince let her go, without following her or something?” Kunal wanted to know.

“Yes, he does. He wonders about her but does not follow her. As he watches her go, his companions, from whom he had got separated, arrive there and they all start back for their camp. He does not speak of her but simply returns to his camp, with his companions.” clarified Manjula.

“His camp is by the way, this house. Right?” Atul wished to confirm this vital point.

“Of course, this house is already a sturdy stone building, used for the prince’s staying, during his hunting expeditions.” Sweta confirmed.

“Well, what next?”

“Now, let us bring some more characters into the story or the story will get dull”, suggested Kajal.

“Ok, when the prince returns to this house, he finds one of his friends here, who had originally not come with them. This friend was their chief commander’s son, but he and the prince had been good friends, since early childhood. Let us call this friend as Veer Singh. Veer is brave, loyal and intelligent and the prince relies a lot on his judgment.” Manjula explained.

“So, after dinner, when everybody else has gone to bed, the prince tells Veer about Megha.” Sweta said.

“Veer obviously teases his friend, saying that the prince has fallen in love with this jungle maiden, but the prince laughs it off. So, they decide that the next day, they would both go to the same place and the prince would point out the girl to Veer.”

The old-fashioned grandfather clock struck twelve now. There seemed to be a commanding tone in its sound. They all looked at each other, like little children, who had been reprimanded by a strict adult, for staying up later than the designated bed time.

“It is quite late. We should all go to bed now. We can continue the story tomorrow”, said Manjula.

“Yes, I guess, we should go to bed now. Oh! I can almost see Megha in my mind’s eyes.” exclaimed Kajal, as they dispersed.

“I wish I could draw some pictures, to illustrate this story.” Manjula murmured, with a smile. Kajal’s enthusiasm was infectious, she thought, with a smile.

That is an idea.” Atul thought to himself. Lacking the romantic imagination, which the women had exhibited through the evening, he felt inclined to contribute something to the creative endeavour. Then and there, he decided to sketch a portrait of Meghmala. Maybe, he would do a painting some time later but for the time being a rough sketch should do. It would also help to calm some of the restless feelings, rioting in his heart, he told himself.

It rained almost the whole night. Manjula always a sound sleeper, was soon fast asleep. Atul, the insufferable insomniac, listened to the rain, as he lay awake. A thousand thoughts were running through his mind. He wondered, if he should tell Manjula everything. It would worry her certainly but he had faith in her sensibility. She would stand by him, he felt sure. Still, he wondered.

At last, the restlessness got the better of him. He got out of bed. Helping himself to a glass of water, he took out his sketch book, a pencil, an eraser and started sketching. His talented hand moved easily, as Meghmala gradually came to life, on the paper. The rain, now heavier than before, seemed to urge him on.

In the same house, in another room, another person was sketching another Meghmala. The rain seemed to guide this person's hand too, as the deft strokes fell on the paper that gave Meghmala her sharp but still gentle beauty.

Neither Atul nor this other person, at this time, knew how similar, their visualizations of Meghmala, were. Also, unknown to them was that they had, both drawn their respective Meghmala, with her hands outstretched towards a falling rain. A blinding rain that was lashing at her upturned face, soaking her cruelly, while she seemed to request a service of it!

What this request was, none of them knew. They had no choice but to draw as the falling rain urged them to.

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"Is that all *Maalkin*?" asked Hari, in his quiet, respectful tones.

Manjula was alone in the house. It being a clear, rainless day, the others had gone for a visit to the village. Manjula had decided to stay back and arrange one of the rooms which she had not had time to arrange to her satisfaction, earlier. Now, with Hari's help, she was quite satisfied.

"Yeah, I guess that will be all Hari. I wish I could just open that cupboard at the corner. There is no lock, but the doors are kind of jammed." Manjula murmured.

"They have not been opened for ages, perhaps, so the doors have got jammed. Still, I will try." Hari got to work immediately upon the stubborn cupboard and finally managed to open it.

Manjula dismissed Hari and started sorting through the things, in the cupboard. There were several things in there. None of them impressed Manjula much. They were the kind of discarded things, one found in old houses. She was about to close the cupboard, when something caught her eye.

It was a roll of paper, more like parchment, used in earlier days, lying at the bottom of the cupboard. Manjula took it up and unrolled it. It was a painting and from the look of it, an old one. It was a portrait of a young, beautiful girl. A strange sensation passed through Manjula as she gazed at the picture.

There are moments, in life, when the most rational of human beings discard the claims of reason and simply accept what their instinct tells them. It was such a moment for Manjula. As she gazed on the picture, she simply realized that she was gazing on a picture of the long-dead Meghmala. Of course, she did not know the real name, but there was no doubt in her mind that this was the girl whose tale they had been spinning the evening before. She had the same light brown complexion, the long-lashed, agile eyes, the thick mass of black hair and the lovely smile, envisioned by them. Dead as she was, there was an air of liveliness about the portrait. It was quite a while, before she was able to take her eyes away from it. Slowly, she rolled back the picture and came down to the living room. She continued to sit there quietly, till she heard the others' voices. They were back from their walk.

Manjula told the others about her find, after dinner. As they settled down for their ritual chat, in the living room, Manjula spoke up.

"Guess what I found today, when arranging the small room at the top!"

"What? Something interesting?" Sweta asked.

"I found a portrait of a girl. It looks like a very old portrait"

"A girl?" Kunal asked in a nonchalant voice.

"Yes and I think she is Meghmala. Whatever her real name was. Our Megha!" Manjula said confidently.

"Where is it? Do show it to us." Kajal demanded.

Without further ado, Manjula produced the object. It passed from one hand to another until it reached Atul. He seemed to freeze when his eyes fell on the picture. Atul had no way of knowing that another person in their group had also experienced the same emotion as Atul, because like Atul, that person had also recognized the same sketched face.

Who told me what she looked like, thought Atul. How did I draw her so exact, the other person who had sketched Meghmala also wondered. They both opened their mouths to say something and they both stopped. Both kept their little secret to themselves. The others were too absorbed in their new find to notice their expressions. So, no one noted that two people in their little group were a little quieter than usual.

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Monilgaon was too small a place, for its history to be found on the internet. Still Atul tried. After everyone had gone to bed, he stayed up for a long time, browsing the net, searching for any records that could be found out about the place. He did manage to decipher some facts about the region as such but nothing more than what Hari had already told them. He

ruefully confessed to himself that the three women, had chosen the wiser path, in deciding to follow their imaginations than grovel over actual facts.

The next morning brought further embellishments to Megha's story. Breakfast was over and though it was not raining yet, it was rather cloudy outside. The heavy downpour of last night had also contributed to making the gardens outside too damp for sitting there. So, the drawing room was again the place of honour where the group sat drinking hot tea.

The initiation came from Sweta.

"Next day, the prince and his friend Veer went to the same clearing, hoping the girl would come there. The prince had described the girl's beauty in glowing terms to his friend, so naturally Veer was curious to see her. They made sure that no one else should accompany them and waited for her. However, she did not come. So, they eventually gave up and returned to the house."

"How disappointing!" pitched in Kunal.

"Oh no! Not disappointing. Just a little less unpredictable." explained Kajal

"Fine, I am all ears. What happened then?" Kunal wanted to know.

"Next day, Prince and Veer go out hunting as usual. In course of their hunt, they get separated from the others and venture rather deep, into the forest. After a while, even they are separated from each other, as the prince, chasing after a tiger, had left Veer far behind him. Veer, having lost track, paused after a while. Sound of running water, came to his ears. Being thirsty, he looked about for the source of the sound and soon reached the point where a waterfall was flowing into a mountain river."

"The one we can see from our terrace, of course." Manjula murmured softly.

"Aleya! That is the name of the waterfall and the river. I found out." Atul contributed simply.

"So, on the banks of Aleya, Veer now stands, quenching his thirst, when he suddenly hears a tiger's loud roar and a piercing human cry. Fearing that his friend, the prince had met with some accident, he rushed in the direction of the sound. The place seemed to be some distance along the river bank only. He found the prince lying on the ground and a dead tiger by his side. The prince's horse was nowhere to be seen. It was obvious that the prince had dismounted from his horse to drink from the river when the tiger had attacked him from behind. The prince had struggled valiantly and finally managed to kill the beast, with his sword but not before being mauled himself." Kajal finished.

"The prince was alive but had received some deep cuts, which were bleeding profusely. Veer first tore parts of his own garment and tied some crude bandages about the prince's wounds, so as to staunch the blood flow. Then he mounted his friend's body and himself upon his own horse and set out for this house. He was hoping that he would be able to return quickly, so that the prince could be treated properly." Manjula said.

“But destiny had other plans. The sun was already setting and now it started to rain. Not a light drizzle but a violent thunderstorm. So much so that Veer began to find it impossible to ride fast. What with the blinding rain and the denseness of the forest, he was barely making any progress. At this point of time, he suddenly spotted a light in the distance. Moving a little closer, he discovered that it was a small stone hut, with a thatched roof, from where the light was coming. The hut seemed to be occupied.” Sweta paused at this point but not for long. “This stone hut was occupied by our Megha and her physician father. Veer knocked on the door and on the door being opened by Megha’s father, apprised him of his problem. The good man and his skillful daughter were not lax in doing everything possible to make the two unfortunate travelers comfortable. The injured prince was laid out on a straw mattress and the physician set to work on him immediately. Soon enough, the prince, having been appropriately medicated and bandaged, was in a sound sleep. The thunderstorm outside, continued unabated.”

No one spoke for the next few moments. The silence was finally broken by Kunal. “Not bad! Rather an unconventional way for the hero and heroine to meet.” said Kunal reflectively.

“Megha’s father was in the habit of coming to the jungle and staying in this hut sometimes, for collecting rare herbs, for his medicines and Megha sometimes accompanied him. He assured Veer that his friend would be all right. He also requested his guest to share in the simple meal, prepared by Megha.” Manjula explained in a satisfied voice.

“I guess, we have to wait for the prince to wake up now, if the story is to proceed? Or does Megha already fall in love with the sleeping prince.” Atul ventured, lighting a cigarette.

“No, we need not wait for the prince to awake. Let us continue a little longer with his friend only. After all, he has been managing the show for a while!” Kajal said happily.

“Hmm! Veer, once his anxiety about the prince put to rest, definitely notices Megha.” Kunal offered, with a smile. “I am sure he understood soon enough that Megha was the girl, mentioned by the prince earlier.”

No one disputed the obviousness of this turn of events. Characters of a romantic story are usually not found wanting in their deductive capabilities. Veer obviously had put two and two together and realized by now that Megha was the elusive girl, the prince had spotted earlier.

“So, what happens next?” Atul’s voice held genuine interest.

“Throughout the night, the storm continued to rage. There were two rooms in the hut, partitioned by a crude wall. Veer slept in the same room in which the prince was sleeping, while Megha and her father were asleep in the adjoining room. Next morning, Veer awoke quite early. There was silence all around. However, on getting up, he realized that he and the prince were the only ones, not awake yet. The good physician was already up and so was his feisty daughter. They were working quietly, in one corner of the room. A large

number of wild leaves, roots and strange fruits were heaped up in front of them. It was clear that they were picking out certain herbs, for preparation of their medicines. Veer sat down beside them and started talking to the man. In fact, he tried to help them in their sorting of the collected herbs also, while he talked. In the meantime, the Prince awoke and came into the room. Veer was relieved that the Prince's wounds looked better. The weather having cleared, they decided to leave right away." Manjula, having continued this far, looked around, at her companions.

The readers, by this time, are sure to appreciate that the progress of the story was deriving richly from the fertile and romantic imaginations of the three ladies, involved in the discussion. Their enthusiasm seemed now to have infected the two uninterested male members also. The proof of this came, in the next few moments, for the next bend in this tale, was offered by one of them.

"Now that the weather was clear, obviously our heroes must depart from this humble hut. So, they began to get ready to depart. However, when a royal prince and his close friend are concerned, there must be some royal gift or token spared for the good family, which had served their prince, so loyally, the night before. The Prince then took off a golden ring from his own finger and presented that to the physician, as a token of his gratitude. He also declared that if at any time, the good man felt in need of any favour, he might appeal to the prince directly. The ring, he assured, would serve as the guarantee that his wish would be granted." Atul finished with a satisfied air.

"Whew! The quintessential royal promise! Well done, Atul!" Kunal said laughing. He was joined by the others.

However, something had stirred the happy-go-lucky Kunal also, as was proved by his next comment. "I have a suggestion. Why should only the prince have all the magnanimity to offer? Why not give our Veer also a chance? Maybe, not a sapphire ring, like the royalty, but he too can offer something to Megha's family, as a token of his gratitude! What say?"

"Okay, Kunal. If you so please! What is your suggestion that Veer should offer?" Manjula demanded cheerfully.

"I have a feeling that Veer's gift would be for Megha." Kajal commented thoughtfully

"Funny you're saying that, Kajal. I was thinking the same. Have you noticed, we all seem to have taken a preference to Veer." remarked Sweta in an amused voice.

"So, what does Veer gift them or to Megha?" demanded Kunal a little impatiently.

"To Megha's father, he simply offers his heartfelt appreciation for the service provided to him and his injured friend. However, he does give something to Megha, though not openly. He leaves a little mound of oats near the herbs, which they had been working with. He takes a long twig and encircles the oats with it and quietly tells her that he has left a gift, not for her, but for her beloved Meru." Sweta's voice was rather firm. There was no need

to be so solemn about it but strangely, no one protested or challenged her conviction on this point. Not even Kunal, whose idea, this gifting gesture had originally been.

“Oats! Was he carrying them on his person?” Manjula wanted to know.

“Yeah, why not? It makes sense. I mean, I have never been on a hunting trip myself but if you are riding horses, you might keep a small stack of oats or corn on your person to feed the horse sometimes. Won’t you? The good thing is that they did not fall off or get all smashed up in their adventures.” Kunal had a perfectly reasonable explanation for this practice of carrying oats about.

“Okay, that is settled then. A little mound of oats, circled by a long twig taken from the same herb heap, Megha and her physician father had been sorting. Although, if you ask me, it is more of a tease than an actual gift!” Atul summed it up in his cool but firm way.

“Yeah, that is right but then he might have already heard from the prince that the horse had been called Meru by the girl. Whistling to wild horses or making friends with them is hardly normal behavior for a young girl, whose outwardly behavior must have been in keeping with the sobriety required by the norms of the society. So, yeah, it is not so much a gift but more of a tease for the young girl.” Manjula offered.

“I like that! One royal token is enough. Too much of heavy gifting will only weigh down the story.” Kajal delivered this ultimatum, while giving Kunal a look that was stern and playful at the same time.

The prosaic but redoubtable Kunal however, had one more demand. “Hey, why do we just keep saying prince, prince. Give the poor fellow a name. Even princes have names, after all.”

“Oh, Kunal. A prince is a prince, especially in a story. Why bother with his name!” Kajal cried impatiently.

Manjula, however, in keeping with her peacemaking nature, took up Kunal on the point, with an amused laugh.

“Why not? Let Kunal have his prince named. Kunal, you choose the name. Come on.”

“Dhruvajyoty” Kunal’s answer was prompt, which rather surprised his listeners. Atul had to tease his friend about it. “Oh my! Seems like Kunal has been really mulling over this story, more than he is letting on! Hmm. Dhruvajyoty. Good enough name for a royal personage. Although, I am not sure, the name will catch on much with us. We will of course keep calling him the ‘Prince’ only.”

This crucial point, having been decided, the story telling progressed further. Prince Dhruvajyoty and his faithful friend returned to the house and there was no doubt in any one’s mind that that two youthful hearts had been touched, if not conquered. The question was whether a third youthful heart, belonging to a certain maiden, had been affected or not.

Atul and Kunal, maybe because of the camaraderie felt towards their own sex, desired prompt emotion, on the side of the unpredictable Megha. The ladies however, were not willing to rush Megha immediately, into any strong emotion. She was, they argued, the fulcrum about which the story was revolving and thereby deserved a wider berth.

Nevertheless, there seemed to be a lull, in Megha's story now. Some vague suggestions were made in the next few moments but none of them were accepted.

"We seem to have arrived at a writer's block or maybe, I should say "*writers' block*", as this story has not one but five writers." Atul remarked smilingly.

"Maybe Megha herself will give us some ideas. Let us ask her", Kajal suddenly blurted out.

Four curious pairs of eyes looked at her searchingly, so she proceeded to explain hastily. "I mean, let us take a good look at her portrait once again. Maybe, we will have an inspiration."

Manjula, with a special pride, stemming from having discovered it, went into her room and returned with the curled up painting.

It was flattened out on the centre table, by placement of odd objects at the four corners. They all pored over it. The photograph of the lovely girl seemed to gaze humorously at them. The expression in her eyes was pleasantly amused with a slight tinge of affection in them.

The girl's dress was blue, but her dupatta was motley of more than one shades of blue. It was a rich and gorgeous dress that more than set off the girl's beauty. She was wearing long ear rings, set with blue stones, which even in the portrait, seemed to be dangling merrily. Her neck was adorned with a single chain, but the pendants caught their eyes. Instead of a single pendant adorning the middle, there were two of them, connected with a small link and they looked similar. Each was a lovely piece, cut in the shape of a flower, whose centre comprised of three concentric circles of various colours. Every concentric circle had been created with the diligent placement of minute sparkling stones of a different shade. There was a small rod like element connecting the back sides of the three concentric circles, in a given pendant. There were five petals to each of these flower-like lockets, each cut into a smooth 'S' shape. The petals had the same shade of azure blue, as those of her ear rings. Her hands were folded in front of her but one of her hands was holding up the wrist of the other, so that a ring on her left hand's ring finger was prominently displayed. It was a simple ring with around five stones set together, encircled in gold. However, there was some irregularity about these stones in the displayed ring. They were of different sizes and had a jumbled kind of appearance. Still, the overall look was funky and beautiful. The painter had drawn these articles of her adornment, with meticulous attention. Despite all the finery, her entire look had something simple and mischievous about it. It was not an air of luxuriousness that radiated out of her but rather an aroma of country fresh vitality.

“She is wearing beautiful jewels. Isn’t she?” Kajal murmured appreciatively.

“She has caught a prince’s fancy. It is only natural that she should. I am sure; her necklace and ear rings were gifts from the love-struck prince. A mere physician’s daughter cannot afford these beauties, surely.” Sweta offered.

The three women continued their jewel-centered conversation, as Atul and Kunal moved away. Their eyes, as they looked up at each other, seemed to say “Women! How they love jewels!”

“You know, these jewels, especially this necklace may have its own story.” It was Manjula’s suggestion.

“Yes, it may. Maybe the prince wanted to gift her something uniquely beautiful. He had it declared across the kingdom that a particularly beautiful jewel, unsurpassed in its glory, be brought to him and he chose this one out, of a numerous other presented for the purpose.” Kajal suggested hopefully. Her pretty face was suffused with excitement.

“Sounds plausible but how did this occasion arise?” Kajal wondered aloud.

“Let us weave all the aspects of the story together. This need not be a story that happened all in one day but over a period of time.” Manjula suggested sensibly.

This met with unanimous approval, followed by a short silence, which was broken by Kajal.

“Somehow, I think that golden ring, studded with gems which the prince gifted to Megha’s father, should come in the picture. Maybe, Megha or her family needed some favour, for which she approached the prince and things proceeded from there.”

“Even with a golden ring, I do not think, it would have been very easy, to gain admittance to a royal personage.” Kunal reflected thoughtfully. “I am sure there was a lot of red tape even back then.”

“An important point indeed!” Atul said seriously.

“Okay. Then let Veer come into the picture. He is the chief commander’s son and also the prince’s friend.”

“Seems a sensible idea! After all, Veer already knew them and was well disposed towards them.” Sweta was satisfied with the state of affairs.

“So, when they need to contact the prince later, Veer becomes the medium.” Atul summed up.

“Now, the question is as what is this favour which they need.” Kunal, as usual, wanted a practical answer.

“It must be something really important. Ordinary citizens would not go about disturbing princes, for trivial things. Maybe a life and death issue.” Sweta said, as if in reply to Kunal’s query.

“Whose life and death? Megha’s?” Kunal spoke again.

“It need not be Megha’s directly but someone really close to her, perhaps her father’s.” Kajal clarified uncertainly.

“Megha’s father is a physician. He treats a lot of people. What if he someday, treats a patient who is not well favoured in the eyes of society and thereby incurs the wrath of, say, the king himself?”

“Rather dramatic but not impossible when royalties are concerned. Our king might have enemies who want to overthrow him. There is a conspiracy going on in the court and an attempt is made on his life. The attempt fails and the attacker flees, though injured by the royal soldiers. He manages to get out of the castle and enters the village, where Megha stays. In an injured state, he runs into their house, where he collapses, before explaining anything.” Kajal offered.

“Megha’s father, a physician and conscientious by nature, has no option but to treat this unknown injured man. He does so, not knowing his real identity. Rather a dangerous situation for the honest man.” Kunal finished.

“Yes! And his honesty gets him into trouble later, for the man dies and the man is identified later as a traitor to the king.” Atul continued.

“Well. Kings are not always very fair but why should the good man get into trouble, just for having treated an injured man?” Kunal asked in a dissatisfied voice.

There was a silence for a few minutes, as everyone tried to come up with a more plausible plot.

“Maybe because Megha and her family discover some dangerous secret.” Kajal suggested hopefully.

“Yes, a secret but it need not be what everyone believes. Why cannot it be such that this injured man who dies and is known as a traitor, was actually not a traitor? Perhaps, king has other enemies whom he does not suspect, say his own prime minister, and this man was actually a loyal man, who had discovered the truth and the prime minister was therefore in a rush to get this man out of the way and also establish his infamy, at the same time. This man had perhaps made some kind of attempt to make the truth known to the king but his intentions having been discovered by the villainous prime minister, he came under

attack and was forced to flee. Before dying, he entrusts a small bag to Megha's father, containing a letter which can reveal this secret." Manjula declared.

"In my opinion, the bag should contain something more beside a letter." This came from Swetha.

"Why so?" Atul wanted to know.

"There are two reasons for this. First, in those days, a real physical object would always carry a greater weight than just a document. You see, there was no handwriting analysis and stuff like that, in those days. A letter can be only so important, as far as it is backed up by something more concrete." Sweta's logical mind was quite certain on this point.

"Hmm! So, what should this additional piece of damning evidence be?"

"A jewel of course!" Kajal's voice was absolutely unwavering.

"Now, Kajal, why a jewel? Here we are talking about deadly conspiracies and like the woman you are, you have to bring in a piece of jewellery for the place of honour. It may be something more important, like a seal or something." Kunal protested. His eyes found Atul's eyes and seemed to say "Women and their jewels". Atul smiled but said not a word.

"Your thinking maybe is right, Kunal, but I cannot help thinking that it will be a jewel somehow." Manjula ventured.

Since all the eyes looked askance at her, Manjula continued but there was a slight hesitation in her voice now. "I have been wondering about that portrait of Megha. Did you guys notice that the necklace she is wearing has actually two pendants, instead of one?"

"Now, that you say it, Manjula. Yes, that is actually a little unusual."

Five heads bowed down attentively on the portrait that had been lying flat on the centre table and there was a general nodding of heads, at least among the women, on this seemingly pertinent observation.

"Hmm! It looks like the two ends of the connecting link are designed that way." Sweta ventured.

"What do you mean, Sweta?" Kajal asked.

"I do not know what they call it but yesterday, I went to a small shop in the village and I saw a similar style. I bought one in fact, as I quite liked it. I will show you."

Saying this, Sweta disappeared into her room and returned with a necklace. It was a simple one, but like the one in the portrait, it had two pendants, connected by a small link. Deftly, Sweta unattached one of the pendants, by disconnecting it from the connecting link on one side while with the remaining body of the chain on the other side. The chain now looked broken in half. The next moment Sweta had connected the open half of the mentioned connecting link to the remaining body of the chain, so that it was a single necklace once again but with just one pendant. The detached pendant was now resting placidly on the table, while Sweta upheld the necklace for everyone's viewing. The whole exercise had taken barely half a minute.

“So, unlike most pendants which contain a loop, through which a chain slips through, these pendants have very small clasps attached on their back sides, where they can be attached to the chain. When worn and seen from the front, the whole thing looks like one continuous piece. No one will guess that it can be dismantled in such a way.” Sweta explained triumphantly.

Another half a minute had to be spent and sweta had dismantled the necklace once again to reattach the second pendant and restore the necklace to its former form, i.e. with two pendants.

“Quite a neat piece of work, I must say. It can serve as three different necklaces, depending on whether you want to attach one pendant or two pendants or no pendant at all. Without pendants, it can even be worn as a simple chain. The connecting link between the pendants is of the same design as the rest of the body of the chain and may be fastened directly to the chain, without any intervening pendants at all. However, these pendants, with all this technique can be attached only with this mechanism. They do not even have the customary loop, usually present in every pendant, for slipping the chain through.” Kunal summarized appreciatively.

“So Sweta, what you are suggesting is that Megha’s necklace has a similar kind of technique. Right?” Majula asked.

“yes, why not?” Sweta replied with a shrug.

“Indeed, why not? This technique is not very common,i.e. of two pendants instead of one or of fastening them in this way, instead of slipping a chain through a loop in the pendant. In how many jewellery shops do you find such a convoluted system usually?” Sweta was insistent.

“And what is really interesting is that such a convoluted design, which is hardly seen anywhere else, you found here in this little village. That is surely weird.” Even dreamy Kajal’s voice had a note of incredulity in it.

“Actually, it might not be such a weird thing after all.” This came from Atul.

He raised his palms in a placatory gesture before going on. “Sometimes a given technology or way of doing things may be lost over time. Yet, it is possible that in a remote corner of the globe, the knowledge persists, having been passed from generation to generation. This portrait was found in this house which is quite old. So, maybe this is an actual portrait of someone who lived in this area and maybe such necklaces were designed by artisans of that time and still are by some artisan, who has inherited this knowledge.”

Atul now focused his attention on Sweta, before continuing further. “Tell me something, Sweta. Was this necklace the only such piece in that shop or there were many like this?”

“I did not notice. It was a small shop, almost a hut in fact and I did not linger very long. I simply picked it up because it was kind of different and that is when the little girl minding

the shop showed me how to detach and reattach the pendants. Obviously, she was hoping to impress me, so that I would buy it and I did.” Sweta answered and smiled.

“That is rather exciting.” Kajal said excitedly. “It connects this portrait uniquely with this place and reinforces the belief that the portrait might be of an actual woman, who actually lived around this area.”

“I never doubted that. There is something very vivid about this girl. Her smile, her expression! Characters in a painting often have a dream-like, unreal quality about them. That is the hardly the case here. Either the girl’s personality influenced the intensity of the painting or the painter was an exceptionally good one to have captured the vividness so well. Don’t you all agree?” Manjula enquired.

For a moment, Atul looked like he wanted to say something but something stopped him. Of course, nobody noticed his discomfiture, as he thought about that sketch he had made that rainy night. Where had the inspiration come from? Was it something deep in his subconscious that had surfaced that night or something actually present in the atmosphere of this place? As far as he knew, he had neither visited this place nor known anything about it before, so the idea of subconscious knowledge did not seem very plausible. Then what had guided his hand so definitively.

Unexpectedly, the next comment came not from the ladies but from Kunal.

“There is another point of interest here. The two pendants in the portrait are not exactly similar. There are three concentric circles in each pendant as you can see but the colour of the circles differs. In the left one, the inner most circle is violet, the middle one purple and the outermost one is red, while in the right pendant, it is the opposite. The middle one is still purple but the outermost circle is violet and the inner circle is red. Also the rod connecting the circles to each other are in different directions. The one on the left is like a computer keyboards’s forward slash while the one on the right resembles a backslash. Almost as if the direction of the rod suggests as which pendant should be on which side, left or right. It is of course possible to interchange them but it seems like there is a hint of a plan here.”

“A similar pattern can be seen in Sweta’s necklace also. It is much less elaborate but here also there are three concentric circles in each pendant and the colour scheme of the inner and outer circles is exactly the opposite, while the middle one is of the same colour. The connecting rods at the back of the circles are also similar.” Kunal concluded.

“Hmm! We can make some use of this in our story, perhaps. The two pendants are part of a unique set. They should always be fastened together, in the same necklace, in a certain way, otherwise the necklace is not complete or right somehow.” Kajal offered with a good natured chuckle.

Her suggestion was met with approval by the ladies, while neither Atul nor Kunal made any comment.

Kajal continued further. “So, let one of these pendants be what is in that bag, entrusted to megha’s father.”

The whole group had become so engrossed in the design of the necklace in the painting and its comparison with Sweta’s purchase that the storyline had been almost forgotten. This was now rectified as the thread was picked up eagerly again.

“Not a bad idea, Kajal. We were looking for something substantial for that secret-containing bag. This pendant, or rather one of these might very well be in that bag with some kind of explaining letter.” Manjula suggested.

“Hmm! We will have to think up some explanation of course, but for the time being, this will do. The injured man mentions that there is a letter and a jewel in the bag, which must be shown to the king, as he will know the significance of it. However, no one else must know of it, nor should it fall in the hands of his enemies who are presently searching for it. It is these enemies the stranger is running from.”

“It makes sense. He arrives at their house, in a badly injured state. The physician treats him but the poor wretch is beyond any help. The man realizes that he is dying. So he entrusts his secret to the physician, who he presumes, is an honest man. Soon after this, the plotting prime minister’s soldiers arrive and the dead man’s identity is established as a traitor. His bag and other possessions are found on his body and the body handed over to the soldiers but Megha and her family had just the time to remove the bag containing the incriminating letter and the other proof. They pretend to know nothing except that he had arrived in an injured state and died soon after. The prime minister and his accomplices try to get the truth out of him but neither he nor his daughter reveal anything.”

Sweta summed up and as an afterthought added. “It is not really as impossible as it sounds. Powerful and unscrupulous people will generally stop at nothing.”

“Okay, agreed. So, Megha’s father gets framed and there are only two ways by which he can save his life. Either, he betrays the trust of the dead martyr and gives up the terrible letter or he is, by some means, able to reveal the truth to the king himself. Even if he decides to do the former, there is no guarantee that it will ensure his safety, as the powerful conspirator, might not like to take chances, by keeping such a man alive, who knows the terrible secret.” Atul surmised calmly.

“Hmm! The situation is indeed grim.” Kunal had no option but to agree, with the general mood.

“Their only hope now is the sapphire ring.” Kajal muttered excitedly.

“Exactly! The very thing- to ask for help from the young prince! After all, he had given the ring with a promise of assistance and in their hopeless condition; they decided to give it a try.” Manjula’s deep, warm voice was quite matter-of-fact.

“I guess this is where Veer comes into the picture. He is capable of approaching the prince directly. So, he is contacted somehow and taken into confidence, eventually becoming the unofficial representative of Megha’s plea to the young prince.” This was Atul’s conclusion.

“No, Veer does not convey the case. Megha just sends the ring to the prince, through Veer and requests for an interview with the royal personage, she had once helped to nurse.” Sweta’s tone ingrained a deep conviction. A strong and intelligent woman herself, she could visualize Megha bearing the burden on her own shoulders.

“Does the prince grant this interview?” was Kunal’s obvious query.

“Of course, he does. He is bound by his promise.” Kajal declared admonishingly.

Kunal gave an amused chuckle that brought a smile to everyone’s face. Among them settled down a contented silence and an unpronounced realization that the story spinning would be taken up again, later.

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“What happens when Megha meets the prince? Did they fall in love immediately?” Kajal demanded, when the story spinning resumed the next day.

It was raining again outside. So, there was nothing else to do but sit around talking. After having tried some typical indoor games like tambola and word making, none of which had succeeded to amuse them much, it had been decided that story telling or rather story making was infinitely more entertaining. So there they were.

“It is too early to say that. First, they have to meet or rather first Megha has to meet at least Veer. After all, meeting the prince will never be easy. It will be rendered even more difficult if Megha’s father has been framed and things like that”, Sweta was matter of fact as usual.

“Hmm! True! Still something has to be done.” Kunal said lightly, yet firmly. After a minute of thoughtful silence, Manjula finally spoke.

“This house, let us somehow bring this house into the picture.”

“This house?” Atul asked

“Yes, Why not? After all Megha’s portrait was found in this house. Why should this story not have this house in it?” Manjula was insistent.

“You are right , Manju.” Kajal too seemed quite sure.

Ok. Then let us think up something. This house, it need not belong to Megha’s family. It might be a place where Megha stayed for a while, maybe when her father got into trouble or something like that.” Sweta contributed.

“You have to think up a solid ground for that , Sweta. When a man gets framed by the system, it won’t be everybody who will be going around offering shelter to the man’s family. There has to be a case of strong loyalty or some obligation on the part of the man, who offers refuge to his daughter.” This pragmatic analysis was a result of Kunal’s sharp mind, of course.

“Totally agree but let us not bring in more obligations. One obligated royalty is good enough for a story.” Sweta concluded.

“Ok. Then this house belongs to someone who has a loyalty to Megha but my guess is that even then, there would have been some element of subterfuge in Megha’s staying here. I mean, it is a big house. So, maybe Megha was hidden away in some corner by one or a handful of faithful people stealthily, without open advertisement of her presence. Is that good enough?” This was Manjula’s practical suggestion.

Everyone agreed on this point. So, after some more back and forth conversation, the following premise was reached at. Megha’s father had an estranged brother. This brother had also been trained as a physician initially but later abandoned the noble profession to become a trader of goods , deeming it a more profitable venture than treating sick people. He had made a lot of money but had not been that lucky on the family front as he lost both his sturdy boys one by one to early deaths. Megha had always been a darling of her Uncle and aunt. Megha’s father , though not on a very good standing with his own brother, had let Megha mix more freely with her Uncle’s family.

“In his time of crisis, he advised Megha to seek help from this brother of his. He advised her to contact them quietly. His hope would be that if suspected, they could always say that the relationship between the two brothers was not warm enough to warrant helping a man, in trouble with the law.” Manjula neatly summed it up.

“Hmm! Not bad! I guess, we are not stretching it too much by bringing in this sub plot of estranged brother an all that! In the olden times also, there did exist some dysfunctionalities within the families, I believe.” Kunal wanted to clarify.

“Of course, Kunal. Don’t be so sarcastic! Not everything was nice and sweet in the earlier days. Moreover, if we are bringing in a dysfunctional family, we are also bringing in a story of loyalty where the uncle loves his niece enough to help her in her time of need, even though he does not get along with his own brother.” Sweta scolded.

Kunal raised his hand in mock surrender and bowed his head to signify his acceptance of this surmise. So the story telling continued.

Megha, somehow managed to come to her Uncle’s house. Maybe, she was used to coming to this place more often. The hut in the forest, where she and her father used to come on their herb collection visits could not be far off. During those visits, maybe she was in the habit of paying a short visit to her uncle’s family, though unaccompanied by her father.

This house being on the banks of the river could not be very far from that alleged hut in the forest. After all, Veer had found the hut quite easily on the day of the prince's accident.

"Yes, it makes sense actually. In those days, locations were not so widely known. A small hut in the forest might be one of those places which not everyone can trace easily. So, when Megha's father was arrested and she realized that she too needs to disappear quickly or she might go the same way, the first place she thinks of, is this non-descript hut in the remote forest." Kajal was quite emphatic.

"In fact, I have a nice storyline to wrap it all up. Megha does not come to this house after her father is arrested. After all, think about it. If they come to arrest the physician, why should they leave his daughter intact? She might know something. Better to haul in both of them at the same time. Megha and her father, as soon as they discover the injured stranger's identity and secret, realize immediately as what a powder of keg this might turn out to be. The honest man he is, her father's first concern is to secure the bag containing the secret in a place where it is not likely to be tampered easily. The hut in the forest answers the description. On the very night of the injured stranger's death, he sets Megha the task of removing the important objects from his own house. That is how, Megha also escapes immediate arrest alongside her father. Soon after she is gone, the conspirator's lackeys arrive at her house to frame and arrest her father. By entrusting the task of hiding the important objects, he has managed to save his daughter also, from the immediate danger he knows, is sure to descend soon upon his house." Atul had presented his story in such a convincing manner that there was no question of anyone raising any objections at all.

"That is good, Atul. It makes quite sense, although it imparts even greater smartness and freedom to Megha for a girl of those times. I mean, in those days, girls hardly ever travelled alone and here our heroine is taking on a lot, I must say." Sweta seemed to be speaking more to herself than to the group.

"Yeah, you are right Sweta but you have to understand that this is after all a crisis. There is not much time before, Megha's father realizes, there will be a crackdown. After all, the man he has treated is dead and his dead body is in their house. They have to move fast. So, Megha packs her meagre bag, with the important articles and leaves the house while her father stays behind to face whatever storm is coming." Kunal summed it up with conviction.

Kajal stared at Kunal with wonder in her eyes. To think that Kunal of all people, was taking such an active interest in the story building was surprising to her. Kunal, who was always so down-to-earth, so practical, so mocking of everything remotely sentimental or imaginative! Maybe her gaze attracted his gaze for he looked in her direction. Their eyes locked for a second but instead of smiling at his wife, he abruptly looked away from her. An action, that further surprised but also amused his wife.

The rest of the story building team was, however, in full swing. Manjula had now taken up the mantle. In her clear, melodious voice, she was going over Megha's adventures in her own lucid style.

“Megha leaves her home and comes to this place. She comes to this house, which is her uncle’s house and tells him everything. It helps that all this happens during the night, so maybe her Uncle was able to take her in quietly and arrange for her stay in some remote corner of the house, without too many people being the wiser. Having understood the gravity of the situation, he would want to keep the thing under wraps for the time being.”

“We have forgotten one very important point.” Sweta challenged.

As everyone looked in her direction, she blurted out. “The sapphire ring given to her father by the prince! This story will come to naught if she forgets the ring.” Sweta clarified excitedly.

“Of course! We have not forgotten it at all. She definitely took it with her along with the articles entrusted to them by the injured stranger. The point we need to clarify here is as whether she hid those entrusted things in that hut in the forest or did she bring them to her uncle’s house straightaway?” Atul wanted to know.

“We need to think that part more thoroughly later. For the time being, let us assume that she brought everything with her. In fact, maybe she was in the habit of always keeping the sapphire ring on her own person always! Maybe around a garland, she was in the habit of wearing around her neck, hidden by her clothes.” Kajal volunteered.

“Why not? It is a royal gift after all!” Kunal commented in a mockingly serious tone.

“Hmm! So our Megha is now a fugitive, running from law and in hiding.” Atul murmured thoughtfully.

Sweta had been quiet for some time. In fact, she had been observing the portrait very carefully. So Manjula nudged her gently.

“What are you thinking, Sweta? You are very quiet suddenly. Don’t you like the story?”

Sweta raised her eyes to look at them. “No, something just caught my eye.”

Obviously, her friends demanded to know what had interested her.

She pointed her finger at the portrait, lightly touching the left hand. “Do you see this ring on her finger? It has five stones set in it. That is nothing strange but do you see the arrangement? It is not orderly. More like some small stones have been jumbled together and then encircled. Even the sizes are uneven. It looks pretty but for the rest of the jewellery, which is so harmoniously arranged, this one looks rather odd. Yet, the colouring is done so intricately and it is prominently displayed also.”

“Yeah, you are right but maybe it is not such a big deal. This ring is just a little crooked, that’s all.” Kunal dismissed it.

Kajal however, had to counter her husband as usual.

“It may not be a big deal but I still like it. Sometimes, a little imperfection, in midst of so-called perfect pieces looks refreshing.”

“Hmm...then we definitely have to weave a story around this imperfectly designed ring also. Do you think, it could be the token given by the prince? I do not think so. It is too imperfectly made to be a prince’s jewel. It has to have some sentimental value for our heroine! A ring, seemingly ordinary and even imperfect but still worn lovingly by Megha!”

Manjula’s voice had no hesitation in it. She was convinced herself and so were her listeners.

“Won’t it be a lark if we could somehow discover the prince’s ring and also this imperfect ring also in the house?”

Kajal clapped her hands excitedly, as she expressed this far-fetched wish.

Somehow, this brought a comic relief to the creative group.

Also, the rain had stopped now and there seemed to be an unsaid directive among the friends that the story telling should always be accompanied by rain.

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They did not discover the ring in the house but they discovered something else. This discovery was no less surprising nevertheless. The source of this discovery was their caretaker’s little granddaughter, who was often in the habit of coming to play in the garden. She was a pretty, sprightly girl of ten years, adept at amusing herself without any adult supervision.

Manjula who loved kids had already made friends with the little girl. Unlike the city kids who seemed so hard to please, this rustic child had not required much. A couple of cookies and some friendly queries about her own self had done the trick. Laali was already devoted to her Manjula didi. At this time, she was busy in a corner of the garden, playing with her assortment of dolls and other things, while Manjula was seated on a bench perusing a book. Kajal and Sweta had gone out for a walk and the men seemed to be busy doing something. Manjula didn’t know what and didn’t particularly care at this moment. She was reading her book and glancing at the little girl playing nearby.

It always amused Manjula as how kids, especially little girls, always chose a cozy corner to make their own and how they loved to enact impromptu plays, in which they played more than one parts, with perfect aplomb.

Laali, at this moment, was doing exactly the same. She had three dolls in front of her, two males and one female and there was a nice little story being put out by little Laali around them. There were also a few pieces of jewellery and even a couple of feathers that had managed to weave themselves into Laali's narration. Thinking about their own story-making sessions of the last few days, a smile appeared on Manjula's lips. She leaned forward a little to observe Laali's playing. The child was, as children usually are, perfectly absorbed in her play. One of the male dolls was in the act of gifting something to the female doll, Manjula gathered. She decided to converse with Laali about her story.

"Those are lovely dolls, aren't they Laali?"

Praising a child's toys, always seemed to make a child more amenable to conversation than anything else a grown up could say.

Laali smiled but did not say anything.

"Will you tell me the story, you are enacting, Laali?" Manjula ventured.

"Oh! I just make it up, didi."

"Well. It seems like a good one, Laali! I would like to hear it." Manjula said encouragingly. Laali considered this for a moment. Then looked at Manjula full in the face. There was a strange expression on her face as if she was about to share something momentous with her Manjula didi.

"Ok, didi, I will tell you, but you have to promise not to laugh at me." A solemn expression had replaced the soft smile of a few minutes ago, on the little girl's face.

Manjula, always considerate of the feelings of the young, composed her face enough, to solemnly promise the girl that laughing was absolutely out of question. Being a teacher, who spent a good deal of time with young people, not just in classrooms but also outside, she could appreciate that a child's imagination was indeed a precious asset. Hence, the act of sharing this private asset with an outsider, called for a certain seriousness.

Assured by Manjula's sincere promise, the little girl narrated her tale. It was a simple tale but as the story progressed, Manjula grew more and more interested. In fact, the truth was that she was not only impressed with Laali's tale, she was actually stunned.

She felt a sharp stab of disappointment when Hari's voice, calling for Laali, interrupted the story teller its fascinated hearer. Laali however, seemed to have been expecting it, for she immediately excused herself and ran back to her grandfather. She returned a few minutes later and started gathering up her things. She seemed to have forgotten that a few minutes earlier, she had been in the process of narrating a story to Manjula.

Manjula however was impatient. Even the few moments of interruption had irritated her.

“You did not finish your story, Laali!” Any of her acquaintances would have been surprised at the note of impatience in Manjula’s voice. It was only a tale conjured up by a child’s imagination, they would have said. Yet, Manjula was acting like the most important conversation in the world was being abandoned mercilessly, in the middle.

Laali too looked a little surprised as she raised her head to look at Manjula.

For a fraction of second, she did not speak and then when she spoke, her voice held a faint note of hesitation in it.

“I have to go now, didi. Bhaiya has come to take me home. It is a long story. Maybe, I can tell you later, didi”

Manjula raised her eyes from Laali’s face to spot the lanky lad standing near the gate with Hari. Undoubtedly, he was the elder brother, Laali was referring to. Even at this distance, she could spot the resemblance the tall village boy bore little Laali as well as to old Hari, who was grandfather to both the children.

“I am sure, it won’t take very long, Laali”. There was a note of pleading, almost laced with desperation, in Manjula’s voice as she uttered these words.

Even Laali seemed to be at a loss of words. She had expected her Manjula didi to be interested and maybe say it was a good story but she had definitely not expected her to be this desperate for its ending.

Finally, Manjula sensed the incongruity of the situation and sighed. Dusk was falling and it was only natural that Laali’s family would want her back before it grew too dark. It also tended to become suddenly quite cold in these hilly areas and little Laali wasn’t wearing any warm clothes. Her grandfather Hari had been designated more work in the house and was not leaving anytime soon. This piece of information must have been known to Laali’s mother, so no wonder, the older sibling had been sent to fetch the little girl home. Manjula’s insistence that she delay her departure for the sake of a mere story, hardly made any sense.

Manjula sighed and in a calmer voice gave Laali permission to leave with her brother.

Laali nodded her pretty head and went back to her playthings which she had been in the act of putting inside an old bag. Lost in her own thoughts, Manjula noted that instead of carrying the bag with her, she stuffed it in one of the bushes under a tree and left.

Manjula called her back. “Laali, are you not going to take your toys with you?”

At these words, Laali turned back with a jerk and Manjula was surprised to see a look of dismay on her innocent face. Laali was a pretty child, with a nut brown complexion and doe-like eyes. Those eyes, at this moment, held something like fear as she glanced at Manjula.

Her voice, when she answered, had an apologizing tint to it. "I never take them with me, didi. I only play with them, when I come here." She seemed to be about to say more but thought the better of it and ran back to where her brother and grandfather were standing.

As Manjula watched her, the little girl instead of leaving with her brother right away, pulled her grandfather's hand to draw his attention. She saw the old man bend down, as Laali whispered something urgently in his ear. Laali stole a few furtive glances at Manjula while doing so. Her grandfather too looked in Manjula's direction once, as he listened to his grand daughter. Then, it seemed to Manjula that he assured the girl about something before sending her and her brother on their way. Laali threw a last look in Manjula's direction before finally leaving.

Watching from a distance, the whole episode seemed like a hurried conference between the old man and the little girl. Manjula vaguely wondered why their glances in her direction had been laced with worry.

However, she soon dismissed this thought from her mind as she threw her mind back to what had perplexed her before.

"It is only a child's imagination." She muttered, nodding to herself. A few moments later, she refined her own statement. "It is only imagination."

It was growing dark and a gust of cool air brushed Manjula's hair, as she picked up her book and stood up to go into the house. However, she could not help herself but turn around again and look at the spot where Laali had stuffed her bag of toys before running off. It was an innocuous place and so was the bag. Yet, Manjula felt the air to be heavy with promise as she looked at them.

The sound of the gate opening drew her towards the sound. Sweta and Kajal were back, laughing about something. The tinkling sound of their laughter seemed to fill the cool evening air with something pleasant. Manjula considered sharing her thoughts with them but then shrugged and abandoned the idea. Once again, she muttered softly to herself.

"It is only imagination."

The three women were spending a pleasant time in the kitchen. It was raining again outside. It had been Sweta's idea to fry some *pakodis* to go with with the *Khichdi* that their caretaker's wife had been ordered to prepare for their dinner that night. After all *khichdi* and hot *Pakodis* were the recommended fare for a rainy weather, as Sweta had pointed out. So there they were enjoying preparing the same, when Hari entered the kitchen and requested for a word with Manjula.

Manjula turned to the man with a smile to say what he wanted but there was an air of secrecy about the old man. He seemed to want to speak to his mistress in private. So, Manjula stepped out of the kitchen, towards the balcony, to hear what he had come to say.

He seemed a little reluctant to speak initially but finally spoke up.

“Mem sahib, it is about Laali.” He began.

“Laali? What about her?” Manjula asked with surprise.

“Mem sahib, she was worried that you would be angry with her, about those toys. Although, I can assure you that she has never taken out anything out of this house.” Hari said.

“Toys? You mean the ones she was playing with today, in the garden? But they are her toys, aren’t they?” Manjula was perplexed.

“Actually, they are not.” Hari replied slowly.

Manjula waited for him to say something more. He spoke up immediately.

“Actually mem sahib, all those things were there in this house. In the attic room. We found them when we were clearing out the house before sahib’s arrival. Laali had come with me that day and she wanted to play with them. None of these things seemed much expensive, so I let her take some of the things but I forbade her from taking anything out of the premises. She has been obedient about that, Mem sahib.”

Manjula was feeling a strange kind of excitement on hearing this story. If someone had asked her the reason for it, she would not have been able to explain it but she couldn’t help feel excited.

In a calm voice, she asked Hari a question.

“Attic room? You never told me about it before.”

“I told Sahib but he was not much interested to look into it.” Hari replied.

Seeing Manjula did not speak, Hari’s face looked a little worried. He hesitantly asked her. “Are you angry with me and Laali, mem sahib?”

Manjula was brought back from her thoughts by Hari’s words. She realized that Hari was waiting for her to say something.

She gave him a reassuring smile. “It is alright, Hari. No, I am not angry with you or Laali.”

Hari’s face relaxed.

After a moment, she spoke again. “Can you show me this attic room?”

“Sure, Mem sahib. It is at the top of the stairs to the terrace. It is a very small room. I cleaned the room as such but there was a lot of stuff lying around, which I didn’t know if

you would like to keep or throw away. So, I just dumped everything in it in a big trunk, which was lying there. All these toys were in that trunk only. Do you want to see it now?"

Manjula was not surprised that Atul had failed to apprise her about this room which was still not sorted out. It was the kind of thing, a man is not likely to consider very significant. She came to a decision. Dinner was still a couple of hours away. They had time. The three of them could take a quick look. Clearing out an attic room would look like, it was the prerogative of the mistress of the house but she decided to take Sweta and Kajal along with her. Maybe, it was time she shared Laali's story also with them.

"Hari, lets us see this room right now"

She quickly went back to the kitchen and called her friends.

"Sweta, Kajal, come with me. I am going to clear out the attic room and I want you girls to come with me."

Kajal did not seem surprised to hear Manjula's request but Sweta looked askance at her. Manjula gave her a smile and something in the sparkle of her eye, convinced Sweta that it was more than a household chore that Manjula was about to embark upon.

After all, these were old friends and though Manjula had the reputation of being essentially prosaic by nature, her close friend was aware that there were depths to her nature, though not always visible. Maybe not as much as Kajal but Manjula too had the gift of appreciating imagination and sensitiveness.

So, the three women followed Hari to the attic room. It was situated adjacent to the terrace itself and the door was a rather narrow and short one.

As Hari had promised, the room's floor had been swept clean. There were a couple of old boxes and one rather massive trunk lying in one corner. From the looks, it seemed like a very old trunk. Though rusted and coated with a heavy layer of dust, it still looked quite strong and they had to help Hari to open the lid and lay it to a side.

At first sight, it looked like it contained nothing but a bundle of old clothes but once Hari had removed them, a curious assortment of things were revealed. A variety of small dolls, inexpensive but pretty pieces of jewellery, small framed pictures of everyday things and a lot more. In fact, there were lots of miniature pieces of everyday objects, perfectly formed, which looked like they were carved out of wood. Some looked damaged while some were in rather good condition for the neglected state they were in. For a moment, each of them was lost in their private thoughts as they took in the collection. Then Manjula decided to tell her story.

First, she dismissed the caretaker who had been waiting for orders and then embarked on Laali's episode in the evening. She narrated in detail the story Laali had shared with her. Her two companions listened in silence and were quiet for some time when she finished.

There seemed to be a tacit understanding among them that it was better not to comment. At least not immediately. A flippant comment could shatter the mood that they all felt and being women, they appreciated the poignancy of this mood.

Kajal was the first to break the silence. She sighed softly. "It might be just a coincidence but none of want to believe it is. Isn't it? We wish to think it is something deeper."

"There is something I want to show you, girls. It is even more amazing than Laali's story." Manjula and Kajal looked at her expectantly.

"Come with me". Sweta was already on her feet, dusting her hands and walking towards the door.

They latched the attic room and walked down the steps.

Sweta led the way to her room. Once all three of them were inside, she closed the door. The other two women were a little surprised by her furtiveness but didn't say anything. Sweta then proceeded to open her suitcase and took out quite a no. of things from it, dumping them carelessly on her bed. The suitcase was almost empty before she finally found what she had been looking for. It was a sketching notebook. She opened it and held it out for her friends to see the first page.

Both her friends knew that Sweta had a knack for sketching. She did not always get the time for painting her pictures but sketching she did a lot. So, they were initially not surprised to see the page held out for their perusal.

There was no mistaking the fact that the sketch was of Meghmala. A different take you would say, a slightly different angle than in the portrait discovered by Kajal, but the face was the same. Instead of looking directly at the viewer, her face was slightly tilted to one side, as if she was looking at something else intently ,when captured on the paper. Her dress too was simpler. None of the impressive jewellery, seen in the other painting adorned her in this rough sketch.

Kajal was the first one to speak. There was admiration in her voice.

"It is really nice, Sweta. You have captured the likeness so well. That too, with the head tilted to a slight angle, giving her a nice profile."

"Yes, indeed." Kajal agreed.

"You should do more sketching. You really have a talent for the same." Kajal added warmly.

Sweta still hadn't spoken a word.

Maybe her silence conveyed something to her two friends. They looked at her. That is when she finally dropped her bombshell.

“I was not capturing any likeness when I drew the picture. I drew this before I had seen the portrait found by Manjula. I drew it the first night we reached here.” She told them quietly.

There was a silence in the room for at least one full minute. It was broken, not by a logical explanation from Manjula or any addition of information by Sweta but by a burst of exclamation from the usually imaginative Kajal.

“But that is impossible! How can you draw something so exact? You must have seen something, somewhere. If not in this house, then somewhere else.”

“Yes, it is strange. Sweta, think again. Did you hear any such story or see any such portrait? It can be anywhere. Maybe in some book or maybe a painting in some museum’s gallery.” This was from Manjula. Her tone was calm but matter-of-fact.

“I have come to this town for the first time in my life. I had no inkling of this place at all and nothing comes to my mind as where I might have seen anything like her.” Sweta’s voice was puzzled as she answered.

Seeing that her friends were still looking at her incredulously, she added. “Listen, I have been thinking about it, since the day Kajal showed us the picture. The reason I did not say anything was because I found it weird myself. Since then, every time we take up the story telling, I have thought of sharing this with you all but always dismissed it as one of those strange things. But today, on hearing the story that Laali told to Manjula...”

Her voice trailed off, as the three women looked at each other.

It was left to Manjula to complete the unfinished thought.

“With Laali’s story matching so much with the story imagined by us, it seems like we are being told something. Isn’t it?”

Kajal nodded slowly and then asked a question.

“Sweta, do you remember anything special about the night or the time when you actually sketched this?”

Sweta thought for a while and slowly shook her head as she answered kajal’s question.

“It was kind of late, after we had all retired for the night. It was raining heavily. I was feeling quite happy and relaxed but sleep wouldn’t come to me. So, I walked out to the balcony and watched the rain. Then I decided to sketch. We had already started on our story weaving, remember? Maybe, my mind was full of it, so I sketched a girl. A beautiful, village girl! I am not surprised by that. It is the uncanny resemblance with the actual portrait that I cannot understand.”

“A psychologist might give a hundred explanations about it, I am sure.” Manjula said.

“Hmm! And maybe there is some damn practical explanation about it!” Sweta’s voice had regained its hard practicality again.

“Well, there are two things, I can think of, that we can do.” Sweta went on.

“What?” Kajal wanted to know.

“Firstly, we can get hold of Laali and ask her where she got this story from. Did she make it up or did she hear about it. For all we know, maybe there is such a story around these parts and she is simply repeating that with some embellishments of her own. It is quite plausible.”

“That won’t explain how we got at the same story ourselves. We haven’t heard any such thing. Even when we spoke to Hari, I do not remember he mentioned any such story or for that matter, any sequence of events that happened in this house.” Manjula objected.

“That part, we will ponder later. First things first. First let us ask Laali and maybe we will get a clue.”

“What is other thing we can do?” Kajal asked a little impatiently.
Sweta took some time to answer.

“I have to do this.” She said at last.
Seeing the perplexed look on the two faces in front of her, she elaborated slowly.

“I will try to do some more sketches. Just take up my pen and see if anything more materializes. Unconsciously, that is!” Sweta’s voice was a little hesitant as she said the last part.

Her two friends neither reiterated nor raised any objection to this suggestion.

At this point, they could hear men’s voices coming from drawing room. They had stepped out for a walk and were now back. The three girls nodded, as if each was summarizing something in their own minds. Wordlessly, they proceeded back to the kitchen.

As they did so, Kajal made an observation.

“Have you noticed one thing? Our story was still not complete while Laali’s story is.”

Both Sweta and Manjula considered this.

“Yes, actually you are right. Do you think, we would have reached the same conclusion if we had continued?” Manjula wondered.

“Yes, I am quite sure about that. We wouldn’t be standing around discussing this thing so much if we were not spooked about the uncanny similarity of the stories. Even the names

of the characters are exactly the same. Meghmala, Veer, Prince Dhuvajyoty. It is really too much of coincidence. I don't know what to think." Kajal was emphatic.

"Now, we can no longer indulge in that story making any more. We already know the ending." Sweta commented with a gentle sigh.

The loss was appreciated keenly by both Manjula and Kajal. In her mind, Manjula was thinking that they could still go ahead with it and maybe come to a different ending. It might be fun to see if they could make up a different story than what little Laali had narrated. However, in her heart, Manjula knew that it would not happen so. There was a flow to this tale as inevitable as the rush of a mountain stream. It might deviate a bit here and there, break a few banks on its course maybe, but the ultimate destination was very much certain. She just knew, in a strange way, that Laali, in her gentle, childlike voice had narrated the one and only tale that could be Meghmala's story.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden question from Kajal.

"Sweta, why did you suddenly decide to show us your sketch? I mean, you had already seen the picture found by Manjula and we were still in the process of making up the story for the last couple of days. You never said a word. Then what made you change your mind today? Was it something you spotted in that trunk?" Kajal's voice, though low had a note of excitement in it. Sensitive as she was by nature, it was obvious that she had sensed something in Sweta's behavior in the attic room.

Even Manjula had to admit that in the excitement of seeing Sweta's sketch and narrating Laali's tale, she had never questioned this essential fact. Now, she recalled, there had been a decisiveness about Sweta when she had stood up, saying she had something to show them. Had she spotted something special in that mass of playthings? Something that had intrigued them just as Laali's tale had surprised herself?

She immediately looked at Sweta, waiting to hear her answer.

However, no further conversation was possible at that instant as Kunal and Atul burst into the kitchen just then. They had gone for a walk, which they claimed, had given them a massive appetite. It was only humane, Kunal claimed, to feed them the excellent meal, which the ladies of the house had so lovingly prepared.

The somber, reflective mood of a few minutes ago was immediately replaced by one of jovialness and unaffected male humour. Manjula laughed at their overdone gestures of hunger and Sweta rolled up her eyes in a show of mocking disgust. Kajal looked exasperated with that gentle, tolerant smile that seemed reserved for her husband a good deal of the time.

Nevertheless, normal conversation could be resumed only after they had all settled down comfortably in the drawing room. It had been an excellent dinner, both Atul and Kunal claimed and the hot coffee they were sipping now was just the epitome of perfection that

mankind strived for. So the two men assured the ladies. It had been Kunal's idea to have coffee after dinner. It was irregular of course and others had protested at first but his enthusiasm had carried the point. It was a vacation after all and the weather was deliciously cool. Thunder clouds could already be heard in the distance and it was sure to rain long and heavy during the night.

It was Atul who noticed the preoccupation among the three women. Unlike other days, he and Kunal seemed to be doing most of the talking while the three ladies seemed more content to listen. So, he teasingly asked them if they had already lost interest in the tale they had been weaving about the imaginary Megha. His query, thrown out so carelessly seemed to stiffen the three of them. Atul noted that they glanced at each other furtively and there seemed to be a reluctance in them towards the topic. This so called furtiveness had but lasted for a fraction of second only though. He was about to say more when Sweta spoke, in what seemed to Atul, a very solemn voice. Even Kunal, who had been in the process of telling a joke, paused to stare at her curiously.

"I have a suggestion for you men. From now on, we women will no longer join in the story making. It will be Atul and Kunal's job to finish the story. What say? Are you guys up to the challenge?" Shewta threw a meaningful look at all of them. Even Kunal, in a vague sense, felt like there was more to Sweta's suggestion than she was letting on. He sensed rather than thought that although Sweta's suggestion had been unexpected, the other two women nodded ever so slightly. There seemed to some sort of understanding between them which they were not sharing with the men. Atul, on the other hand, was quite sure that something was in the air.

Before any of them could reply, there was a loud thunderbolt from the sky, followed instantaneously by that swishing sound that announces rain. They could hear the gentle but urgent sound of the falling rain as the skies opened up. It definitely promised to be a very wet night.

Sweta spoke again. "What? Are you guys willing?"

Later, Atul would confess that he had accepted the challenge and said so even before he had realized that he had spoken. Something had guided him, he had sworn. He had looked at Kunal and there had been an unspoken agreement between them that this is how it was supposed to be.

So, that is how it happened finally. The two men, considered the most unimaginative of the group, completed the story. Not once, were they interrupted by any of the women, except to ask for some clarification on some point of the story. Their output was applauded by their listeners, not just as satisfactory but actually quite 'correct'. This adjective, mentioned by Kajal and reinforced by Manjula and Sweta puzzled the men though.

How can a story, developed from imagination be correct? After all, isn't imagination a rather free-willed force? It can move in lots of different directions but who is to say as which direction is the correct one!

Next day, Manjula was sitting in the garden with a book in her hand when she looked up to see little Laali standing a little distance away. There was a slightly apprehensive look on her face as she looked at her Manjula didi. Manjula realized that maybe the question of the playthings which Laali had been found to be playing with yesterday and the fact that she had been summoned to the mistress of the house today, was weighing heavily on her. The first thing, she decided, was to put the girl to ease. So, she smiled warmly at the girl and patted the seat beside her invitingly. Laali didn't hesitate any longer. Once she was seated comfortably and had been reassured that there was to be no scolding, she was more than happy to talk. After some small talk, Manjula decided to broach the real reason for this interview.

"Laali, there are just a few things I wanted to ask you. I hope you will not mind answering me." Manjula began.

Laali nodded her head in an affirmative motion and waited for her mistress to speak.

"Yesterday, you were telling me a story. A story about a village girl called Megha. You see Laali, I was liking your story very much but you had to leave early yesterday, so I called you again today. I really wanted to hear the end of it. Will you please tell it to me?"

Laali was more than happy to oblige. She immediately picked up the tale where she had left off and told the rest of it. She was young but there was nothing vague or fumbling about her. She narrated her tale in a simple yet lucid way. Having told her tale, she watched Manjula with an intelligent, patient expression that seemed to call for a response. Manjula was silent for a few moments as if pondering over something. Laali waited.

"You said that you made up the story. Did you make up the entire story or did you hear parts of it and make up the rest on your own? Did someone tell you a similar story or something?" Manjula ventured.

"No didi, no one told me the story. It just came to my head. Do you think, it is a good story?" Laali asked her back.

"Yes, Laali, it is. It is a very good story. I am surprised that you being so young could make up such a nice story." Manjula plowed on.

Laali smile was a happy one but there was not a trace of pride in it. Maybe, there is an inherent simplicity in the people of these rustic areas, Manjula thought. She could very well imagine the pride or the skepticism which such a compliment might give rise to, if the receiver had happened to be a child of the same age, but reared in a big city.

Manjula asked another question.

"Can you read, Laali?"

"Yes, didi. I am learning to read. I can read Hindi quite well." Laali answered proudly.

“So, do you read any story books or does anyone else you know read story books? Is it possible that someone else could have read or heard a similar story and shared the same with you?” Manjula hated to ask such a question to the little girl for the fear that Laali might take offence at the seeming lack of confidence regarding Laali’s creative talents. Still she had to try.

“No, didi. I do get some books to read now and then. My Bhaiya who goes to school too brings back some books sometimes but they do not have any such story. Why didi, why do you ask?”

Manjula was at a loss as how to answer this query on Laali’s part. The straightforwardness with which Laali had answered her questions left Manjula undecided as to her next course of action. She was about to dismiss the girl when Laali spoke up.

“It is strange that you should ask me all this, didi.” Laali was saying. Manjula looked at her with surprise, her gaze encouraging the girl to go on.

“I told you I made up the story but actually it happened very suddenly.”

“Suddenly? Can you explain yourself, Laali?”

“You see, I had a dream once. I saw most of the events happen in my dream as they happen in this story. Usually, I do not always remember my dreams but this one was very vivid. So, when I woke up, I ran over my dream in my mind and put the story together. Then when Dadu found those toys in the attic room, I got the idea of enacting the story using all those toys.”

This was a wholly unexpected development. Manjula had been suspecting that having heard snippets of some local legend, Laali’s imagination had supplied the rest to reach the final form of the story. Instead she claimed that the whole thing had come to her in a dream. She looked at Laali frankly trying to discern if she was being truthful but she seemed to be completely honest. Manjula’s instinct told her that she was not lying, at least not consciously.

“Did you have this dream only once or several times, Laali?” Manjula wanted to know.

“Only once, didi”

Here Laali paused for a second as if trying to make up her mind about something. She didn’t linger long over whatever she was trying to decide and nodded to herself, before continuing.

“Actually didi, I had this dream while I was in this house only. I had come over with dadu and dadi. They had a lot of work in this house and I was helping them. We were about to leave in the evening when it started raining very heavily. Dadu decided to stay the night in the house. So, we all slept in the attic room. That is when I had the dream.”

If Manjula had been losing interest in this interview, then this last piece of information revived her flagging curiosity. The look of apprehension on Laali's pretty face reappeared when Manjula failed to make a suitable response to this latest confidence on Laali's part.

"Didi, are you angry with us for staying the night here? Dadu was sure that you or Atul chacha won't mind." Laali expressed in a worried voice.

Manjula hastened to reassure the girl.

"Oh no, no Laali. I am not angry at all. I was just wondering. Did you ever have this dream again or just one time?" Manjula wanted to clarify specifically.

"No didi, just that one time. I never had that dream again. Neither did I spend another night here nor did I have such a dream again but I remembered the story very clearly. I remember the girl's face also very clearly." Laali's voice had become softer as she spoke the last sentence.

This set Manjula thinking. She put another question to the girl.

"You saw the girl's face clearly? If you see her or a picture of her, do you think you will recognize her, Laali?"

Laali nodded her head confidently.

Manjula decided on the spot. What harm it could do, she thought. It was just a picture.

She got up to her feet.

"Come Laali. I am going to show you something. Come with me."

A few minutes later, Laali and Manjula were in the drawing room. Manjula bade Laali to wait while she went to her bedroom to get the painting of Megha. She returned quickly with the picture and laid it on the center table and invited Laali to take a look. She watched the girl very closely. She wanted to make sure that she caught not just her words but also the first expression that would appear on her face when she laid her eyes on the painting. Though she trusted the girl completely, she wanted to make sure that all this discussion about the story had not unduly influenced her imaginative mind.

However, she need not have worried. The girl's reaction was completely satisfactory to Manjula. Her eyes grew round and when she looked up at her mistress, there was a look of delighted but puzzled surprise on her face. Had she been an adult, she would have perhaps broken out in intense exclamations. Maybe because she was a child and children are more capable of accepting the so-called irrational aspects of life, she confirmed excitedly but firmly that it was none other than the Megha of her dreams.

Manjula took a deep breath. A certain understanding seemed to have developed between herself and Laali. She no longer was bothered as whether the questions she asked Laali would baffle the girl. So, Manjula continued her investigation with renewed vigour.

“Laali, you have told the story that you saw in your dreams. You have also identified the face that you call Megha. Now, listen very carefully to me. Are you sure that you have seen Megha only in your dreams and never anywhere else? I mean, any woman in your neighbourhood who kind of looks like her. I know, she is dressed very prettily in this painting but there might be a woman you saw somewhere, dressed ordinarily but with similar features.”

“No, didi. I do not think so. In fact, I remember clearly because her face and another man’s face in the dream are the only ones which were clear. Rest were kind of vague.”

“Another man’s face? Who was that character? The prince whom Megha’s father treated?” Manjula asked hopefully.

“No, didi. Not the prince. I do not remember the prince’s face at all. It was his friend. In my dream his name was Veer Singh. Everyone called him Veer. Megha called him Veer ji.”

Manjula was thoughtful for a second. They did not have any picture of Veer to show Megha. Then a thought came to her mind. Maybe, Laali could sit with Sweta and describe him and Sweta could try sketching him. It would be fun to put a face to another prominent character in their tale.

Initially, both Sweta and Kajal had wanted to be part of this interview but Manjula had dissuaded them that too many people asking too many questions might make the girl nervous. Since Manjula was already on speaking terms with the girl, it had been thought best that Manjula should only question her. It would also look natural, a regular extension of the conversation that had already taken place. Now, she decided to bring in her two friends while Laali waited.

She went to Sweta’s room, where they were now sitting talking to each other and declared her idea to them. Sweta seemed to agree but Kajal had a different idea.

“I do not think, we should do that, Manju. Rather I think, Sweta should try to sketch first and then ask Laali to take a look. After all, that is the surprising thing here. Is it not? None of us has seen Megha, yet Sweta sketches an exact likeness from her imagination. I would have loved to try this myself but I am no artist.”

This idea was accepted by her friends. Sweta looked thoughtful at this suggestion but decided to try anyway. So, Manjula decided to let Laali go for the time being. The little girl was hence sent off with some goodies and the assurance that she was quite free to play with the toys, found in this house, anytime. The little girl went off happily and Manjula returned to her friends.

“You would almost think that this house is haunted. I guess we would think so if the atmosphere of this house were not so happy as such.” Commented Manjula.

The rest of the day went by quite fast. The weather was quite sunny and on the insistence from the men, a good deal of their time was spent outside. After a good lunch, which they decided to have in the garden, they retired to their respective rooms, for a siesta.

Sweta had been feeling a little impatient underneath all the gaiety. So, she heaved a sigh of relief when the others went to their rooms and she could finally be alone to resume her sketching. She wanted to see if her plan of sketching really led to anything. However, her hopes were to be dashed. Sitting on the verandah outside her room, she wasted paper after paper, only to tear each one of them apart. There was no reasonable explanation for why she was not satisfied with her attempts. Yet, something seemed to be missing. They just did not seem right. The handsome and even the ordinary faces that kept appearing on the pages, simply did not seem right for Veer or even the prince she was trying to visualize. At last she gave up. Though she was disappointed, she tried to justify her failure. Maybe she was trying too hard. Sometimes, that clogged up an artist's spontaneity. All she needed was a free mind and she hoped, fresh inspiration would flow in again.

With a sigh, she finally stood up to go back to her room. Others were resting. Maybe, she should take a short nap too, she decided. After all, it was vacation and mid-afternoon siesta would once again be a luxury when she went back to her busy schedule next week.

She had but lain for only few seconds when she sat up on the bed biting her lips. She usually did that when something had clicked in her mind. She nodded to herself as if answering a question in her mind and walked out of her room to go downstairs. The house was quiet as others were all resting by now. There were very faint sounds flowing in from outside, the usual ones but nothing that distracted Sweta.

The painting of Megha was on the top of the center table, inside a paper folder, Kunal had obtained somewhere, for the purpose. She took it out and gazed at the picture. Like always, what caught her attention was the liveliness of her features and the gentleness of her eyes. You could almost feel the sweet warmth that those soft, densely black eyes were full of. A girl with artistic abilities herself, Sweta could well appreciate the importance of this. Either the subject of the portrait, i.e. Megha herself, had been a genuinely very sensitive and compassionate person or the person painting her had been deeply insightful to capture such softness, so flawlessly. Maybe it was both. Maybe, the painter had been deeply impressed by his subject, so that the emotion had kind of flowed in his work. Nevertheless, it was there. Rich patrons who commissioned paintings, often expected the artists to make their subject look better or stronger or more imposing than the reality. However, no one could ask or get satisfactorily, this expression of gentle sweetness, which the painter had somehow splashed the portrait with.

The other interesting aspect was that though it was a lovely portrait done of a lovely lady, it was not as detailed as such commissions usually are. The painting contained just the picture of the girl and no other object. No background at all. As if he had just painted the girl, without bothering to place her in any location. Yet Megha was looking straight at the viewer, as if she was conscious of being captured. There was a slight amused expression about her smile but it was a soft, unconcerned smile. Not a coy, merry or flirtatious curve

of the lips. Rather a condescending but affectionate smile that one gives to one's inferior. Like a big, loving sister smiling at a younger sibling who, she knew, adored her. Once, Sweta had vaguely wondered if the painter could have been an admirer for whom Sweta had posed. The lack of background hinted at a lack of professionalism about the art, eliciting the thought but the nature of Megha's smile negated that firmly, in Sweta's mind.

However, it was the third aspect of the painting which primarily interested Sweta at this moment. On the bottom right corner, there was a small symbol. It might not have been visible in a normal portrait, so small was its size but the emptiness of the background pulled one's attention to it. It was a set of concentric circles with rods connecting the circles. This symbol and Megha were all that the painting had.

In a way, the symbol could be compared to the design of Megha's locket or rather the locket design could be considered a further improvisation of this simple symbol. However, that was not the reason why it had grabbed Sweta's interest. Though artistic, Sweta was also a keen and meticulous observer of details and she had no doubt where she had seen that symbol again. In fact, not just once but again and again. She quickly replaced the painting in its erstwhile folder and started for the attic room. The symbol was simple and clearly etched into her mind. Once, in the attic room, she quickly opened the old trunk, where all those miniatures were stuffed into. Many of them were old and quite worn out but now as she looked closely, she realized that they were not just dolls and toys for little girls to play with. They were more like intricately done miniatures of everyday objects. Most interestingly, most of them had this symbol, somewhere on its body. Some of the objects were too worn out to clearly show the mark but she could locate it on a lot of them. Now that she was expressly looking for it, she found it repeated several times.

In fact, she had spotted this symbol the earlier day also, when she, Manjula and Kajal had been rummaging through this stack and had vaguely identified it as the same one inscribed on the painting's bottom. Now, she was sure. It was the same mark. A set of concentric circles connected by rods.

In itself, she knew, this find was hardly a big deal. At the most, what it signified was that the same person or rather, artist, had created all these miniatures and also painted Megha. This repeated symbol was nothing but the artist's signature. Something, he marked each one of his creations with, to associate it with himself. So, Megha had had an artist who did a lot of artistic work for her, either for love or for money or maybe a little of both.

She neatly packed all the items once again inside the trunk and closed it. She walked back to her room and lay down on her bed. There was no hurry, she decided, to share this piece of observation with her friends. It could wait till everyone was done with their siesta and they all gathered again for the evening tea.

The sky was bright and sunny outside. Not a hint of rain or anything. Sweta soon dozed off and slept peacefully.

The tale

Meghmala watched the rain fall. It had been steadily raining for the last few hours and it looked like it meant to go on forever. Many people would have been bugged by its incessancy but not Megha. She loved the rain. Her mother too had loved the rain. Perhaps she had been the one to pass on this love of rain to her infant daughter ,for an infant she had been, when Megha lost her mother. Her memories were hazy but everyone who had known her mother agreed that she had loved the rain. Maybe, it was Megha's own love for the ethereal element, which drew their attention and made them ascribe it to her dead mother.

Still Megha loved the rain in a way, no one else did. It was not just the falling of rain but everything it involved. The clouds in the sky, the moistness of the breeze, the sparkle of the leaves and flowers. Even the urgency of the mountain streams which a bout of rain seemed to instill in them. Rain, to her, was life and not just life but all that was clean and fresh about life. A sense of peace and contentment seemed to fill her when she heard the sound of rain. It seemed almost like a friend, gently accompanying her as she went about her chores. She loved her own name also. Didn't Megh in hindi mean cloud? The source or rather store houses of all that water that was to fall as rain!

Even in her captivity, the sound of rain, seen from the window of her room, was a comfort to her. It had been several days since she had arrived in this house, in the cover of night. Her placid but contented life had been shattered one night when a heavily injured stranger had unexpectedly arrived at her father's door one night. The stranger was badly injured but his chief concern had not been the condition of his own health but the safety of the dangerous secret whose proof was upon him and which he begged the physician, i.e., Megha's father, to safeguard at all cost. The true man he was, he could not say no to the dying man. The stranger died but not before he had handed over a small satchel containing a letter and some other artifacts, which he claimed, would prove beyond doubt that the last king had not died a natural death but had been murdered by stealth. The master mind behind this treachery was none other than the much revered prime minister, whom the old king had trusted and whom the young prince now looked up to as his most loyal well-wisher. Yet, this man, so much trusted and respected throughout the kingdom, it seemed, was a cold-blooded killer who had masterminded the old king's death and was now plotting the destruction of the young prince, recently ascended to the throne. The mysterious stranger, having discovered this terrible secret, had been on his way to acquaint the prince of this piece of information when the minister's goons, having got wind of the situation, had tried to kill him. The man had somehow managed to escape but not before he was badly injured and in this condition, he had stumbled upon the physician's house, begging for both medical assistance and safe guarding of his dreadful secret. It did not take long for Megha and her father to realise that having been exposed to such a secret, they themselves were in danger. Yet, none of them could find it in their hearts to break the word they had given the dying man. In a split second the decision was made. Megha would leave the house with the damning evidence. She would somehow have to find a way to get the information across to the royal prince. If the stranger had found his way to their house, there was not much time to lose. The goons who had been after the man, would surely arrive very soon to the same place which was their home and no amount of denial would convince them that she and her father were ignorant of the secret, the man had been carrying on him. Her father

was too old to run. He would only slow her down. Moreover, Megha had only that day, returned from a visit to her aunt, residing in the next village. It was possible to keep up the pretense for a little time at least that the old physician was alone in the house. The fact that another person, could be aware of the secret and about to attempt to disclose the truth to the right people, could at least be kept at bay for some time, the old man thought. Moreover, it was also the one and only way to keep Megha from immediate danger from those goons, who he was sure, would arrive at any time to their house. So, Megha with a heavy heart, packed few things quickly and set out for her uncle's house. This uncle and her father had been estranged for a long time but towards Megha, this uncle had always been deeply affectionate. So, despite his own estrangement with his younger brother, Megha's father had always allowed his daughter to keep in touch with her uncle. It was to his house that he advised her now to escape and from there try to get a message across to the new king. Megha knew the way well because she and her father often went to a hut in the forest for purpose of collection of herbs and her uncle's house was not far away from the place, though outside the forest premises. He only hoped that in the darkness of the night, she would somehow manage to find her way and be able to find shelter over there, without being spotted by anyone. Secrecy and the young girl's safety were the supreme challenges here. Megha, for her part, knew the tremendous danger, their life had suddenly been plunged into. She too was afraid for her father's safety but knew that lingering around would not do any good. So, with a heavy though nevertheless brave heart, she set out on her mission, carrying the dead man's satchel and a little food to succor her on her way. For her personal safety, she carried a knife. A homely and gentle girl she was but her father had instilled in her the spirit to fight back, should she happen to face danger.

She had managed to reach her uncle's house and managed to be hidden away in his big house without any outsiders having spotted her arrival. However, the danger was far from over. It was not enough to reach safety. She had to stay hidden for a while and also find a way to send message to the new king, while remaining hidden herself. For a few days, she just lived quietly in a small room at the back of the house. No one except her own uncle or uncle's wife bringing her food and whatever else she might need. However, it was a difficult proposition for her uncle being a well-known merchant, his house was always flooded with visitors coming and going at all hours of the day. Sooner or later, someone would have noticed that a girl was being kept hidden there. So, his uncle decided that Megha should be removed to another smaller house, accompanied by an aged and trusted female servant, who had been with his household for a long time. They could stay quietly there and in the meantime she would try to arrange to send message to the king. The aged servant had a nephew who was a little soft in the head and could not speak. This dumb but harmless boy also accompanied Megha and the old servant to this other house. Life was not very jolly for Megha these days. She had left behind her father, who she feared might be in danger. She had no way of knowing whether the goons had succeeded in discovering that their terrible secret had been made known to the physician and what desperate measures they would take, once they knew. Her uncle tried to make covert queries but showing too much interest in his estranged brother's well being could also arouse suspicions and had to be avoided. News did not travel that fast those days and what with trying to stay hidden herself, Megha and her uncle were rather in the dark about the situation back home. Life passed slowly and drearily for the young girl.

In these days , she had only two things to comfort here. One was the dumb boy who had grown quite fond of her and tried to amuse her, in his own guileless way. The poor fellow though grossly deficient in his mental capacities, had but exceptionally gifted hands. Untrained and raw, the boy was an amateur artist. He could fashion pretty shapes and things out of wood, clay or even soft stones that he could lay his hands on. Every day, he would present Megha with some fresh creation, carved out of his own hands. A small flower one day. A little drum perhaps the other day. All miniatures , so of little actual use but a source of delight for the lonely and worried girl. Megha too encouraged her talented friend and soon the day came when he carved things not just from his own imagination but as demanded by Megha. It became almost a game for them both. She would playfully tease him if he could create a particular miniature and the boy, hesitantly at first, would attack the problem with a spirited gusto. In one or two days, he would manage to come up with something quite pretty. It soon became a matter of pride for the young, mute boy to present the loveliest miniatures to his young and beautiful mistress. Having been shunned all his life for his mental deficiencies and the inability to speak, Megha's compassionate encouragement of his gifts won his simple heart so much that had he had an elder sister of his own, he could not have been more devoted to him. So, these two lonely souls along with the kind hearted old woman who cared for them, managed to eke out their hidden existence.

The other source of comfort to Megha's weary heart was the ring she wore in a long golden garland round her neck. It was the one she had been given by the royal prince, in fact who was now the king, when she and her father had assisted him during an accident he had on a hunting trip. Megha and her father had been visiting their hut in the jungle, when the prince had been brought there in an injured state, by his friend. It could have been a severe wound but her able father's timely intervention had revived the prince quite quickly. The grateful royal had then presented them with a ring of his own as a token of his appreciation and given his word that should they ever demand any favour of him and show this ring, they would not be disappointed. Megha had worn the ring around her neck since then. The royal gift that it was, she could not bring herself to find a safer place for it than on her own person. Moreover, the ring also held another fascination for her. The sight of it evoked the memory of the dear face, she had seen that day for the first time. The sharp features and the warm brown skin tone, along with the intelligence in his warm twinkling eyes always brought a smile to her face. Even during these trying times, she found herself feeling a sense of joy as she thought of that dear face.

Megha was a good looking girl and she knew it. Her knowledge of this piece of information was no more important to her than many other day-to-day facts that one knows and lives with. She had not imparted it any special importance, least of all any feeling of pride or arrogance. Yet, since the day, when she encountered the prince and his companion and then parted from them, she had often found herself wondering how *he* had liked or not liked her. Did he think she was pretty or had she no more registered in his memory than just the physician's daughter who tended to the prince's injuries? She sometimes found herself wondering about these things , specially while finishing her toilette or when she lay awake during the long nights, thinking about a great many things.

The sound of rain falling further added to her sense of apprehension, on this account, tinging it with a pleasant sense of expectation.

So, it happened that the germ of an idea slowly started taking root in her mind. After all, that seemed like the only solution to her present predicament. The royal ring had to be sent to the royal person. Her only hope was to inform the prince in person of the conspiracy she had come to know about his trusted minister and then throw herself to his mercy and that of the almighty who had brought all this to pass.

It was one thing to come up with an idea and a completely different thing to plan its execution. It was no easy matter to attempt such an expedition but then, Megha was a resourceful girl. After thinking long and hard, she concluded that the royal ring and the evidence in her possession were too precious and also dangerous at the same time to be trusted to another person. It would be suicide for her plans and wellbeing to hand it over to someone else. So, there was only one thing left to do. She would have to go herself, perhaps in a disguise and somehow venture to meet the prince in person. She said so much to her uncle when he came to visit her the next time. His first reaction was, of course, to protest against the danger involved in this plan. However, Megha gradually managed to wear his resistance down with her arguments. Most importantly, she couldn't just stay hidden like this for the rest of her life. Sooner or later, she might be found out and then not only she but also her uncle's family would be in danger. It was only logical that the evil minister's men might guess more than they were aware of and were already spying on Megha's extended family members. It was more prudent to make the first move than just sit and wait for something to happen. Most importantly, she pointed out to her uncle that this whole thing was about a conspiracy that had killed the earlier king. For all they knew, maybe the present king was the minister's next target and even now, as they sat discussing this, the minister might be planning something for the young royal.

At this point, she also apprised her uncle of the chance meeting that she and her father had had with the prince and his friend, in the forest and the royal token which she was, at this moment, wearing around her neck.

"Uncle, I have to somehow meet the prince and in private."

"But my child, how will that ever be possible? He is now the king and a king is never alone. Most importantly, the prime minister and his men will be sure to keep an eye on him all the time. Specially, if the prime minister is behind the old king's death. Worst of all, as we all know, the young king trusts this man. Moreover, there is something else. About your father, I had discreetly made some enquiries." Megha's uncle abruptly stopped at this point as he spotted the horror in his niece's eyes.

"What did you learn, Uncle? Please tell me."

"Nothing that bodes well, Megha. It seems he has suddenly become a recluse. At least, that is what everyone says. He keeps to his house it seems and no longer treats any patients. At least, that is what people whom my men questioned, said."

Megha's eyes filled with tears. Seeing the gloom darkening her face, her uncle immediately sought to assure her.

"Do not lose hope, Megha. From what I have heard, your father seems to be alive and well. He is quite a prominent man in the area maybe that is why the conspirators do not wish to harm him right away. However, they seem to have put some pressure on him and do not wish him to associate with anybody. Perhaps they fear that while going about his dealings with his patients and other people, he might divulge some information. Perhaps, they are not even sure as to what he knows and what he does not know and are just trying to keep him under some kind of house arrest." Megha's uncle was trying to be comforting but nevertheless his own voice was laced with worry.

"It will not take them long to find out about me. Father must have stalled them by saying that I am visiting a relative and hence not at home but surely, they will make enquiries. It will not take them very long to verify that I am no longer at the said relative's place and then they will become suspicious about my absence. That further means that they might start keeping a watch on your place also. Even if they hear that you and my father don't keep much in touch, they will suspect your household of sheltering me or helping in some way. Do you realize what that means, Uncle? We do not have time to lose. I have to impart my information as soon as possible to the king himself."

Megha, in her agitation, was speaking too fast and her breath too was coming in gasps. What she really wanted to do was to sit down and cry but the wretched girl realized that even that luxury was denied to her. She could no more waste time in crying than she could hope that the situation would miraculously straighten out itself. She felt like a trapped animal and yet she was determined to hold on to the desperate courage which the weakest of the weak animal exhibits, when cornered.

"I agree with you, Megha. But the question remains how? He is a king, not a commoner. We cannot just walk up to his house and demand an interview with him."

"That is true, Uncle but even kings need services from other people. They have servants, who clean their houses or cook food for them. We have to find someone who can help us in this regard. If nothing works, then I will disguise myself as some low worker and go to the palace myself. As I told you, I have a ring from the king himself which I can present to him and ask for any favour. The only thing I fear is the scrutiny which I might encounter from the prime minister's spies. If he has really killed the old king, then he will be doubly conscious of anything in the vicinity of the king. So, I cannot just walk up to the palace and present myself. Instead, I have to be in disguise, until I am alone with him. Then I can reveal myself to him. "

The suggestion was of course dangerous but the glint in the young girl's eyes told her uncle that she was determined in her heart. So, the practical man that he was, he decided to waste no more time in dissuading her. Moreover, it was obvious to him also that in a way, she was right. They couldn't just play at this game of hiding forever. Either they would be

found out or live out the rest of their lives in constant danger of being discovered by the evil minister's goons.

After some deliberation, he and Megha came up with a plan. *Janmashtami* was ten days away. The festival for worshipping the birth of playful lord Krishna would be celebrated by the royal household, with much fanfare. It was customary for the king to donate food and clothes to some poor people with his own hands after the ceremony. Her uncle, would somehow manage to get Megha to be part of that group. Then it would be up to her to somehow communicate with him. It was a tall proposition, her uncle felt but Megha seized upon the idea. This might be the closest she might be able to get to the royal personage.

After her uncle left, Megha sat still for a long time. The old woman and her dumb nephew somehow sensed her preoccupation and left her alone. After some time, Megha called the dumb boy to her.

"Madhav, I want you to make something for me." She took off the prince's ring from the chain around her neck and placed it on his hand. "Do you see the design on this ring? I want you to make two exactly like it in wood. Make sure that the colours are same as on this ring." She told him.

The dumb boy, who would never say no to Megha for anything, nodded. Simple, as he was, something in Megha's tone conveyed even to his uncomplicated thinking that this request on her side, was different from her other requests. It was not just a game or a kind gesture on her part to make him feel useful. She had a purpose for the item she had requisitioned for him.

The boy went away to accomplish his task.

The design was not very complicated. It had the shape of a flower, with five petals and at its center, there were three concentric circles. The three circles were held together as a single piece by an intersecting rod. Each of the three concentric circles was of a different colour, created by embedded stones of miniature size. The outermost circle was blue, the middle yellow and the innermost red. There were five petals in this flower, each one no more than a smooth curve, emanating from five different points of the outermost circle. It was a little complex to cut in wood and the colours might also present a problem. In their meagre household, there was hardly any provision for paint, to bring about the differently coloured concentric circles. Moreover, wood might prove to be too clumsy a material for such an intricate design to be cut. The only concession allowed by Megha in this case was that the design might be a little larger than the one on the ring.

She held the ring in her hand gazing thoughtfully. Much as she trusted the boy, even to him, she had not handed over the ring. Instead she had made him draw the design on a piece of mud slab, which he could keep with himself while working. The original ring, she once again slipped though the chain around her neck and wore it as before.

As she lay down to rest, the rain started falling outside. Not an impatient, bustling downpour but a gentle rain that would cleanse the hill sides and make the flowers bloom. Megha closed her eyes and fell asleep. Only rain, the ever fresh rain, had the power to soothe her, even in this hour of her deepest anxiety.

The miniatures were ready just in time. Megha had earlier coaxed the boy to show his handiwork but they were not ready for her perusal until the last day. When he proudly presented them to her on the ninth day of his commission, she was impressed. They were beautiful pieces. Intricate and delicate even in wood. Of course, the boy had not been able to acquire precious stones to put in. He had, ingeniously, placed tiny rice grains to take the place of stones. Before gluing them to the wood, he had coloured them neatly with the required color, so as to achieve the desired colour effect. The boy, though untrained, had a real knack. She was about to say so, when she realized that there was a flaw in one of the pieces. The sequence of colours was not correct. In this flawed piece, the outer circle was red and the innermost circle was blue, when it should have been the opposite. The middle circle was correctly coloured in yellow.

It worried her a little but there wasn't enough time now to rectify the error now. *Janmashtami* was the next day, so Megha's rendezvous was to happen tomorrow. She nevertheless praised the talented boy and steeled her heart to make her attempt the next day. Lord Krishna, she prayed, please be by my side and grant me success. Her own as well as her house-arrested father's life now depended upon the success or failure of her actions tomorrow.

The brave girl knew that tomorrow would be a decisive day for her. Either she would succeed in her objective or she might end up being spotted by some enemy who would definitely seek to end her voice and maybe even the lives of both Megha and her aged father.

The day of Janmashtami dawned beautiful. It had of course rained hard during the night, just as it rained on the day of Lord Krishna's birth. The morning though, was clear and bright. The sky was dotted with clouds but they did not seem any more ready to burst than in the peak of the summer season. The royal palace was resplendently decorated and eager crowds were already collecting outside, in anticipation of the promised royal festivities. A medium sized group was huddled not too far from the palace gates. To naked sight, they looked like a mottled and rather shabby lot but they were actually the lucky ones today. They had been selected to receive special bounty from the hands of the king himself today. Poverty and abject misery were their only eligibility to qualify for this wondrous privilege but so are the ways of this world. Even the miserable have their days of bounty, just as the favoured ones have.

Our Megha, disguised as an old and infirm woman was part of this group. She was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the king though her expectations from him was of a different nature than her companions on this day. She was almost fidgeting and was afraid that someone might notice her. In her hands, which she had purposefully made dirty, she was holding a little pouch of cloth. It contained one wooden model of the royal ring in it. The other

wooden model of the same, along with the real one, was still strung into the gold chain, around her neck and hidden carefully inside her shabby clothes. It would definitely not do if the shabby, old woman begging before the prince, was seen wearing a gold chain and a royal ring. At the same time, this royal token was her only hope of salvation.

A certain murmur among her companions roused her from her thoughts. She looked up and saw the prince, who was now the king, approach the group. A man beside him was holding certain packages, which were undoubtedly the gifts for the hapless group, she was now a part of. There were also a couple of armed soldiers, keeping very close to the royal personage. She had foreseen this problem of course. A king, is never alone. It was always difficult to approach a royal person in complete privacy. After all, privacy is that one thing, they rarely have. Still, this chance was all she had and she would have to make the most of. Megha said a short, quick prayer to Lord Krishna and steeled herself to act.

As an old woman, it would have been acceptable if she had continued to sit but Megha decided to stand up when receiving the king's donation. It would allow her the opportunity to pretend weakness when she required to impart the message.

Finally, the king was in front of her, holding out the package to her. Megha took a deep breath and then accepted the package. The next moment was crucial. She had to accomplish what she had come here for, before he moved on. She had already taken care to be the last in line, for the receiving of gifts. Moving the package in her left hand, she grabbed the king's hand and bent over it as if about to kiss his hand. Before the soldiers could move in to remove her, she pretended to faint and pulled down the king's hand with her, as she slumped to the floor. As Megha had hoped, the king, the gentleman he was, his first instinct was to support the poor woman's hand, who seemed too weak to even keep standing. There was just this fraction of a second when their hands were locked together tightly and Megha slipped the small cloth pouch into his hand and closed it tight. She also murmured into his ear that he should not reveal it to anyone and read the message she had slipped him. The next moment, the king's bodyguards had wrenched her away gently but firmly from the royal personage and she was getting quite an earful from one of them. She quickly slipped back into her adopted role of the weak, silly old woman, apologizing for her awkwardness and begging mercy for the same. The king, if he was surprised, did not show it. In fact, he intervened to shut up the soldier who was reprimanding the woman and instructed his servant to get some water for her. He then moved on but Megha was glad to see that his hand, in which she had slipped the pouch, was still tightly closed.

Even in her grim situation, she had to smile to herself. Why not, she thought. After all, he is a king. Intrigues are hardly a novelty to them. She felt the first glimmer of hope inside her. The king would at least see the wooden model of the ring, he had given her in the past and he would also read her message. Hopefully, he would recognize the design and also the occasion when he had given it away. Hopefully, he would remember but most important was whether and how he decided to act on it. Even more vital was whether he would share this with someone else and if he did, then how trustworthy would that person turn out to be. A kingdom, in which the prime minister was leading the conspiracy against the throne, who could prove to be trustworthy enough, she wondered. Nevertheless, there was nothing else she could do now, except wait and carry out the next stage of her plan.

For the time being, she simply needed to blend into her surroundings so as not to rouse anyone's suspicions and leave as unobtrusively as possible. She loitered around for long enough so as not to rouse any suspicions and then left the palace gate premises.

Megha did not go near the Ganesha temple until it was dark, and she was sure that the ritual *aarti* would be over by then. Then she, now dressed as a simple peasant woman, with her head and most of her face covered, she approached the temple but from the backside. She kept watch from her position and breathed a sigh of relief when the priest finally got ready to leave. It was only a small temple, so the number of devotees was not that large and after the priest had distributed the *prasad* among the few visitors, he left for the day. Megha sat down behind the temple wall and kept watch over the muddy road that led to the temple. There was only one direction from which the temple could be approached. The backside of the temple was a small wood, though not very dense.

It seemed a long wait for the young girl. She was not even sure as what exactly she was waiting for. Would she achieve what she hoped for or had her missive already fallen in the hands of the wrong people who would seek to destroy her? Worse, would the entire exercise turn out to be futile? It took a lot of mental strength on her part to keep negative thoughts at bay, as she waited in the dark, watching the approach road. The silence around her was complete, as if even the trees and the small animals in the wood behind her, were waiting alongside her. No one knew for what but nevertheless waiting.

At last, the stillness was broken by a sound. It was the sound of the hooves of a horse. Not that of a galloping horse but one walking at a steady pace but there was no mistaking that the horse was approaching the temple.

Megha didn't dare reveal herself but listened intently. A man was walking beside the horse and his face was wrapped with a dark cloth. Only his eyes were visible, which were now looking around cautiously. At last, he stood squarely in front of the temple entrance and chanted the words "*Om Ganeshay namah!*". He repeated the chant four times in a loud voice. Megha, who had been counting, now held her breath. No further chant was heard.

She gripped the small knife hanging by her belt and came out in the open. She too chanted "*Om Ganeshay namah!*" but only once. The man faced her. Megha had wrapped part of her dupatta around her face, so that neither could see the face of the other. The man spoke first.

"Well, now that we have both called upon *Siddhidata Ganesh* himself, maybe you can tell me as what was so urgent that you had to meet in secret." His voice seemed slightly amused but every nerve in him was alert as he watched the woman in front of him.

It was the sound of his voice in a conversational tone which jolted Megha. So much so that before she knew herself, she had uncovered her face to glance at the man in front of her. The man, however was smiling, as he revealed his own.

They continued to stand like that, looking at each other until Veer Singh stretched out his hand to show the wooden model of the royal ring. It was the same one which Megha had pressed into the hands of the king, earlier in the day.

Wordlessly, Megha removed her own chain and took out the other two rings and held them out for him to see. One was the original ring imparted by the young prince to Megha's father and the other was the yet another wooden replica of the original ring. Veer observed them carefully and then made his comment. "The colours are not right."

"Yes, I know but that was the best I could do under the circumstances." Megha's voice was steady though her heart was beating fast.

She returned both the rings to her chain and fastened it around her neck once more. She felt like her hands might be shaking, so she pretended to be busy fastening the same tightly.

Veer however, had not taken his eyes off her for a single instant. He was watching every movement of hers with an amused yet serious expression on her face.

They had to get on, Megha thought. So, she took a deep breath.

"How do I know I can trust you? The message had been for the prince, umm..for the king, I mean."

"Did you really expect the king to come running at the first message that comes his way? That too when the messenger was only an old beggar woman?" Veer laughed.

Megha knew he was right but she still had to try. She tried to take a haughty tone as she asked him the next question. "Well, I never thought you were such an unimportant entity yourself, Veer Ji and yet here you are. Did the king send him yourself or did you just manage to get hold of the secret message and the ring and have come to investigate yourself?"

"I am flattered that you do not consider me an unimportant person but aren't we all rather lesser entities when compared with a king? He cannot go everywhere himself but he can always send someone to investigate on his behalf. Is that very hard to understand?"

Veer's tone still had a laughing quality to it but he seemed also to be serious. He looked straight at Megha and spoke again. This time his voice was gentler.

"It must be something very important that you wish to convey to the king. You seem to have taken a good deal of trouble in contacting him and not just contacting him but also doing so in secrecy. Are you in some kind of problem? Why don't you tell me about it?"

Megha was in a dilemma. On one hand, she wanted to trust Veer and tell him everything. On the other hand, the objective part of her mind was hammering at her to be more cautious.

She decided to tarry a little longer.

“What I have to say is indeed very important. So important that I would be comfortable in speaking only to the king himself. How do I know that I can trust you?”

“The king trusts me. He showed me your wooden ring and the message you had enclosed in it, himself. Doesn’t that inspire any confidence in you? In fact, speaking of trust, can’t I ask the same question? You have contacted the king but unlike normal subjects, you have not approached him directly in his court with his royal token. Instead, you are doing all this covertly. Maybe, as his loyal subject, I should be wary of you and your motives.”

Veer’s voice had a flat tone in it but Megha was not fooled. He was as alert as ever. She was also matured enough to know that what he was saying was right. Still, the matter was far too serious to be hastened, lest there should be a fatal mistake on her part. So, she decided to take a gamble.

“You are right. There is no reason for you to trust me nor do I have any reason to trust you either. Where kings and thrones are involved, trust is a light word. Being the son of a soldier, you know what I am talking about. So, I shall propose something.”

Veer did not reply. He was not just the son of an ordinary soldier but the son of the chief commander of the kingdom. People respected and appreciated him not just for that but also for his individual merits. So, the fact that this young girl could so boldly propose a deal, instead of meekly giving in to him, surprised as well as impressed him. Still, he was determined to be patient. He nodded his head as if to encourage her to continue.

Megha too was in a turmoil. It was taking a good deal of self control on her part to refrain from unburdening her heart to this young man but she held on to her stance of utmost caution and discretion. She took a deep breath before speaking.

“My proposal is that you escort me to the king, in private and whatever I have to say, I will say so, only to him. You are free to keep me under strict surveillance every moment but nothing shall induce me to speak unless the king himself is the one listening. Even then, I may be lost but I will take that chance.” Her voice was defiant as she uttered these last words.

“That may be a very difficult proposition to satisfy. I am sure you can appreciate the difficulties. I am not really in the habit of marching anyone desiring so, to the king, in complete privacy. Just as you do not trust me, I cannot trust you implicitly either.” Veer’s voice was now hard. The mocking tone was gone.

“I cannot tell you anything. I fear for my father’s life, i.e. assuming he is still alive and well.” Megha really hadn’t meant to say this last sentence but it had slipped out before she could control herself.

Veer’s eyebrows furrowed on hearing this.

“Your father’s life? What exactly is the matter?” Then he sighed as he realized that the girl in front of him was not going to enlighten him. He had known her only briefly but he could spot the steely stubbornness concealed in her polite, womanly nature. He decided to trust his instinct. As a soldier, his instinct was a sharp one and in any other situation, he would not have hesitated at all but this girl was indeed asking a lot! He made his decision.

“Okay, I will grant your wish but you will have to follow my instructions.”

Megha nodded her assent and waited.

Veer thought for a minute. Then he gave her some instructions.

Veer climbed upon his horse and galloped away. Not once did he look back.

The place Veer had asked her to come was not that far away. Still , she was quite tired by the time, she reached there. It was a small non-descript house , barely visible among a group of trees. A dim light was coming from one of the upper stories but she could not say if there was anyone inside. There was a brook flowing near it, just as Veer had said. Megha walked up to the bank of the stream and splashed some water on her face. She also drank some of the cool water. The taste of cool water in her mouth made her realize how hungry and tired she was. She longed to just lie down for a while and rest but knew it was impossible.

She then started washing her hands in exaggerated gestures and singing the particular song, veer had asked her to, in a loud but melodious voice. She was sitting at an angle which allowed her to keep a watch on the house, lest she should spot someone coming out of it.

She had sung for , like half a minute, when she spotted a figure wrapped in a shawl, coming from one of the sides of the house. It looked like the figure had emerged from a back door and was slowly approaching the bank of the stream where Megha was seated. Megha did not stop her singing though she reduced the volume of her tone and continued to watch the figure. The figure seemed to be an old woman who was much bent over with age. Her shawl seemed to cover not just her face but almost her entire small body. She beckoned to Megha to follow her. Megha did so. Her heart was beating fast but she had no choice but to go through with it now. The old woman entered the house through a back door and asked Megha to come in. She had barely entered the room when the door was closed behind her. She was surprised because she had not spotted anyone else there. Yet, in the dim light, she could make out that there were a few more people in the room. The old woman now removed her shawl and as she did so, also straightened up. She was no longer bent with age but stood tall and erect. She was an old woman as the grey in her hair and the wrinkles on her face, testified but she looked quite strong. Another woman was standing by the side of the room and she too was scrutinizing Megha very intently.

“How many times is it auspicious to chant the name of Lord Ganesha, girl?” The old lady demanded of Megha.

“Four times, *Maaji*.” Megha answered.

“Strange answer, girl but the right one in this case.”

“Search her.” This instruction seemed to be for the other woman in the room.

Megha stiffened herself for a thorough search and was apprehensive about the dagger which she knew would soon be discovered on her person. She hoped it would not jeopardize her plans too much. Of course, she had brought it along only for her personal protection, but would these people understand that?

The woman searching her pulled out the dagger and held it out for the older woman.

“What were you trying, girl? Did you really think you would be allowed to march into the king’s presence with that thing on you?” There was a derisive note in the woman’s tone, as she fingered the dagger in her hand and then carelessly handed it over to another person standing behind her.

“it was just for my own protection, *Maaji*. I did not have any other motive.” Megha murmured in her defense.

The old woman gave a careless snort but made no further comment.

The woman carrying out her body search seemed to be satisfied that Megha had nothing further on her person that could be considered a potential weapon. Even her hair which she had rolled up as a bun on her head had been let loose and inspected thoroughly. She was now ordered to do up her hair once again and once she had done so, her hands were tied up with a rope behind her. It was a comfort that the knot, though tight, did not cut too deeply into her flesh. She was also blindfolded. Overall, Megha felt uncomfortable but no pain was being inflicted on her.

Then one of her arms was taken hold of by someone and she was led off. She had also been reminded of Veer’s earlier instruction that at no point should she talk unless asked to or make any unnecessary noise. It suited Megha just fine. She had absolutely no desire to make any conversation with anyone. As she walked blindfolded, she pondered upon her situation. On one hand, she had been stubborn about not trusting Veer about her purpose and yet she was, at this moment, completely in his power. She had no way of knowing whether he meant to give her a decent hearing with the king or was he marching her off for some nefarious plan of his own? She prayed to Lord Krishna for strength and marched on silently. Their journey started with some downward steps followed by flat terrain again. The place they were passing through, was markedly cooler but the path she was treading was mostly a smooth one. It did not seem like hard ground on which she was walking. There was a smoothness to the path that seemed quite man-made. After a while, she stopped

trying to make these observations and just continued walking. The grip on her arm was firm but not cruel, so she didn't mind.

Finally, they stopped. She heard a thudding sound that sounded like someone knocking on a door with bare knuckles. It was not a very loud sound but in the silence around her, it seemed loud enough. Perhaps someone was already watching for that sound because the door was opened very quickly and a light gust of wind blew into Megha's face.

"All right, you can go now. Only Hariya can accompany me from here." Megha's recognized Veer's voice. She felt her heart skip a beat as she realized that Veer was back on scene. Now, she would know what she had let in herself for. She took a deep breath and waited. The next moment her blindfold was removed and once her eyes had adjusted to the light, she saw his face in the semi-darkness. He was dressed differently than the last time she had seen him. His attire seemed to be simple, rather toned down, more like something one would wear at home than when seen in public.

Veer did not communicate anything to her. Not even a smile. Instead he kept walking and the man Hariya, still accompanying her, walked behind him. They went up some steps, a couple of twisting corridors and then finally entered a small room which had just one chair in it. A rather old carpet was strewn on the floor. A small earthen lamp was perched on a window sill and the window was shuttered fast. The only light in the room came from that lamp and even that seemed very feeble. Megha was just looking around, taking in all these details when a door she had not even spotted on the opposite wall suddenly opened. The person who came in through that door was no less than the king or rather the prince, Megha and her father had treated all those months back. His attire too was rather simple, as if he meant to turn in for the night. Nevertheless, there was a short sword hanging by his belt. The expression on his face was one of youthful curiosity, as if he was quite enjoying all these.

Megha lowered her eyes and genuflected. She would have liked to bring her hands together in an attitude of homage, but the ropes didn't let her. So, she waited in a bowing stance with her head and eyes lowered respectfully.

The king sat down on the only chair in the room and addressed her. Veer gestured to the other man Hariya to wait outside the room and the man left, closing the door behind him.

"Well, it is a strange Brahmin girl who recommends the chanting of mantras an even number of times. Aren't odd numbers considered more propitious in our religion?" The king's tone had just the slight mocking tone.

She answered him. "Yes, Maharaj! It is not recommended but I wanted to make sure that the person was actually following the message sent by me. So, I put in something odd."

"Hmm! Let me see. If someone was to see, it would seem quite natural that a man chants "Om Ganeshay namah!" in front of a Ganesha temple. Yet his chanting that *four* times and

not an odd number of times, would communicate something to you. Not bad!" The king was obviously amused as he continued to watch the girl.

As Megha did not say anything, he spoke again.

"Well, the wooden model of the ring you gave me was quite accurate. In fact, it is quite an ingenious piece of work, though, the colour scheme of the stones is not exactly right. Still, I am curious to know as why you approached me in so much secrecy. You could have easily walked into my *darbar*, like any other petitioner and demanded whatever favour it is that you require. After all, Veer tells me that you have the original ring intact in your safekeeping."

"I was afraid, *Maharaj*! I feared for my life and that of my father, even of my extended family."

"You wanted to see the king in person and now you are in his presence. So, why don't you speak up now? What is so secret and so important that we had to bring you here under so much secrecy?" This came from Veer. Obviously, he was impatient to know everything and could not hold himself much longer.

"Patience, Veer!. Let her find her breath and I am sure she will tell us all about it." The king sounded less impatient than Veer but his eyes were intently fixed on Megha's face as he uttered these soothing words. Megha felt the seriousness of his gaze, even though her eyes were lowered and not directed towards either of the men in the room.

Megha gathered up her courage and started speaking. Slowly and methodically, she took them over the chain of events of the past few months. She also expressed her concern that ever since arriving at her uncle's place, she had not been able to find out any concrete information about what state her father was in presently. They guessed that he was being kept under some kind of house arrest, though they could not be sure.

"Now, you can understand why I was so apprehensive about approaching you directly. The persons involved in this conspiracy are too powerful and I had no way of knowing as whom I could trust and whom I could not."

Megha's voice was now tired. Having fought for so long, she felt totally drained now, both emotionally and physically. She even raised her eyes and looked the king in the eye, as if hoping to find some glimmer of hope in them. The king was very still. If he was shocked at her words, his face gave no such indication. The only change she could spot in his demeanor was that he was no longer smiling. After she had finished speaking, he glanced at Veer. Some silent communication seemed to pass between the two men. Veer was the next to speak.

"Your story is quite interesting, Megha ji, but do you have any proof? Where is this evidence which you say you fled your home with?"

“Yes, I have this evidence stored at a certain place. I can take you there myself or I can tell you where and you can go and check for yourself.” Megha’s answer was prompt and confident now. In fact, she went on to reveal the hiding place for the precious evidence. She gave the exact locations of the spot where she had buried the evidence in a pot, deep inside the earth.

There was silence in the room for a few minutes when Megha stopped speaking. At last, the king got up from his chair.

“You must be tired now. Veer will escort you to a safe place where you must stay until we have verified your information. This evidence, we will need to check up on. Until then, you will have to stay where Veer takes you.” He turned as if to go. Then stopped and faced her again.

“If your story is true then you have done me a great favour and I can assure you that I shall not forget it. But if any of this turns out to be untrue, you can rest assured that then also I will not be in a hurry to forget it.” His voice was both gentle and relentless as he uttered these last words. Then he left through the same door from which he had entered earlier.

Neither Veer nor Megha said anything for a few moments. Then Megha turned to him. Her expression told Veer that she had something to say. So far, there had been a rigidity about her but now her eyes were troubled, as she looked at him. In that instant, veer found himself thinking as how taxing all this must be to her. A young girl, all by herself, entangled in these royal intrigues , separated from her beloved father and burdened with worry about what state he might possibly be in. Before she could open her mouth, he hastened to assure her.

“You must be worried about your father. I can sense how the uncertainty weighs upon you. Don't worry. I shall send out men covertly to gauge the situation in your home. After all, your uncle did tell you that he is alive. Your father is a well known man in your village. A healer always is. It will be too much of a risk to harm him outright. I will find out and I will let you know.”

Megha nodded silently. She was tired but she also felt a sense of peace. She had done what she had set out to do and now the matter was out of her hands. Whatever turn this affair took now, the responsibility was no longer hers. Veer’s words also calmed her. She somehow felt he would do as he had promised. Suddenly, she felt shy , as if it had just dawned on her that she was all alone with a strange man, in a strange place. She looked away when she realized that Veer was watching her intently. Veer too realized and looked away.

Veer was the first to recover. He moved towards the door and knocked on it slightly. The door was opened by Hariya. All three of them went down the steps to the door where her blindfold had been removed. Megha was once again blindfolded and they started on their journey back. At the end of the journey, when Megha was finally able to see again, she found herself in a strange room. It was a small room but comfortably furnished. However,

it had no windows. The only source of ventilation seemed to be a round shaped hole in the wall, near the ceiling and even that had iron bars across it. A young girl, with a cheerful face was assigned to assist her. Megha suspected that despite the friendliness of the assistant, she was to serve as both her helper as well as jailor. For once, this realization did not depress Megha. She had the fortitude to go through it. Despite the fact that she was now officially imprisoned, there was a spring in her step as she accepted her new surroundings.

That night, it rained. Heavily and beautifully!

Megha's days passed quietly. She didn't have much to do here. Her food and other necessities like clothing were brought to her. She was not allowed to go out much. However, there was a small but dense grove of trees behind her room, where she was sometimes allowed to walk around. The servant girl, whose name was Vasudha, always accompanied her on these walks. The house and this grove of trees was surrounded by a high wall on all sides. Although, she never spotted anyone else, she was well aware that the place was a well-guarded one and that her every movement was being carefully observed. Initially, Megha had tried to draw Vasudha into conversation but though the girl always had a smile on her face and never refused Megha anything, she was not one to give away much. Megha understood that Vasudha's reticence was not just part of her nature but also stemmed from specific instructions received from her higher ups.

Lonely minds tend to waver a lot and although her instinct was to trust in the king and his friend Veer Singh, she sometimes found herself thinking pessimistic thoughts. After all, what did she really know about these two men, on whose mercy she had thrown herself? In her mind, she still thought of the king as the handsome prince she and her father had met. That day in the forest now seemed so far away. There had been a wild but gentle youthfulness about the two men she had encountered that day. Yet, the man who had escorted her to the king and the king she had finally bared her terrible secret to, had both seemed so different. There had been a grimness about them both, a certain hardness which differentiates the men from the boys. She had no doubt that the dying man who had imparted the fact of the prime minister's dastardly actions had been saying the truth but she had absolutely no way of gauging the impact of her news on the two men she had told it to. They had expressed neither surprise nor any shock on hearing her story. Had they already suspected something which her tale confirmed or had it come as a thunderbolt to them? At times, she even found herself wondering if the king himself could be trusted. Wasn't history rife with stories of young princes who could not wait for their old fathers to die a natural death and had conspired with other prominent people to hasten their own ascension to the throne? Then there was the question about Veer Singh. From what she had seen so far, his friendship with the royal seemed a steadfast one but how could she be sure!

She even wondered about Vasudha sometimes. The girl seemed a simple village maiden but there was a quietude and a dignity about her which seemed to add gravity to her stature. Once, in an attempt at familiarity, she had asked Vasudha about her family. The girl, who had been smiling affably a few moments ago, had suddenly stiffened. Immediately Megha had cursed herself inwards. She had not failed to observe as how the girl, without refusing

to answer the question changed the topic quickly. Almost, as if she had a secret to hide and Megha was the last person with whom she could possibly share it. Megha had sighed and since then refrained from asking any further questions that could be considered personal.

Last but not the least, there was the uncertainty about her family. Her father, her uncle, her uncle's family. She even found herself missing the dumb Madhav and his aged mother. She could do nothing but wait and hope that Veer would keep the promise he had made to her.

A few more days went by and finally one day, Veer came to visit her. Though, he was solicitous about her wellbeing and comfort, he did not divulge much. However, he brought her one happy nugget of information that her father was very much alive and not in any outward trouble. His discreet enquiries had revealed that he was indeed under some kind of house arrest, implying he was not allowed to invite many people to his house or go out much, it was all being done so tactfully that few people guessed the truth behind his so-called indisposition. Veer's surmise had been correct that the minister's men, no matter how desperate, would not be rash enough to harm the old man just like that. The old man, because of being a renowned healer, had a standing of his own in the community and if any unnatural harm was to come to him, it might raise some eye brows. His reputation was protecting the old man so far. Her uncle's family was also safe and there was no untoward news of any trouble having had come to them. All this was immensely comforting to Megha but beside these assurances, she was not told anything else. She ventured to ask if attempts to locate and verify the evidence imparted by the dying man had succeeded but here Veer clammed up and Megha had to hold her peace.

Still, his visit stirred more than hope in Megha's heart. At least, it made her feel light-hearted enough to enjoy the rains that came regularly now. It being the rainy season, it rained almost every day. Unlike her past life, when she had been free to drink in the beauty of this beautiful weather, her contact with nature was limited to her walks in the walled grove. Still, young and rain-loving as she was, she made the most of it. The mistiness of the falling rain, the feel of damp earth that had soaked up water all night and last but not the least, the clean, shiny look of the trees in her secluded garden. Megha drank in all this and more. Perhaps the realization that this was the only source of joy still left to her, made it all the more precious. At night, sometimes the sound of rain lulled her to sleep while sometimes that very sound kept her awake and made her restless enough to drive sleep away. Her spirit was in a flux. Hope and despair both took turns in stirring her up from time to time.

One day, Megha had an unexpected visitor. The old lady, who had supervised her inspection and blindfolding before her meeting with the king, came to see her. They did not speak much but Megha got the distinct impression that she was being weighed against certain standards. She did not venture to plough the woman for any kind of information as she knew it would be useless but her scrutiny left her wondering. Even Vasudha seemed to be amused and in a rare show of candour, informed Megha that the old lady had been the prince's wet nurse and was fiercely loyal to him. Now that the young king had lost both

his parents, he trusted this lady more than anyone else. The respect he showed to her was akin to that of a son towards his natural mother.

So, days passed by until one day the monotony was broken again. A royal messenger came one day and spoke quietly with Vasudha. It was clear that he was imparting some instructions to her. Vasudha nodded and then the man went off. Megha knew better than to ask the girl anything, so she held her peace. However, Vasudha's attitude seemed to have changed. She was still sparse with communication but her attitude towards her captive seemed to be laced with more reverence and even a touch of mischievous playfulness. Almost as if she was enjoying a delicious secret that she would have loved to share with Megha but was bound not to do so. Like other days, she offered to do Megha's hair that day. As she combed the heavy, luxurious tresses, she commented on the weather. Living with Megha all these days, she had learnt to identify the rich moistness of the air which so moved her captive cum mistress. Megha didn't say anything. Just nodded her agreement with Vasudha's judgement on the expected rains and fell quiet. The truth was that ever since the arrival of the mysterious messenger, she was feeling restless. Her intuition, which always seemed to be sharpened at the prospect of a dense downpour, was telling her something. It was not just a whiff of the coming rain that she sensed in the air. There was something else. There was something brewing, she felt, and it was making her both nervous and hopeful at the same time.

It had not rained for past some days. Maybe it was the heat, coupled with her restlessness, which kept her from sleeping that night. Vasudha though, was sound asleep. Megha after tossing and turning in her bed for a while, decided to stroll out to the garden. Then she remembered that the door, as was the practice every night, was locked from inside and Vasudha had the key on her person. If she wanted to go out or even visit the outhouse, she would have to wake up the girl and ask her to accompany her. The thought of waking the sleeping girl, for such a trivial reason, did not sit well with her. So, she abandoned the idea of a walk. However, instead of continuing to lying down, she got up to sit on her bed. She couldn't go out for a stroll but she could always get herself a glass of water. There was an earthen pitcher and an earthen glass in the room's corner for the purpose. She was just about to do so when a soft sound caught her attention.

The night was very still. Even the usual sounds, audible during these hours seemed to be missing today. Perhaps, it was this unusual stillness which alerted her ears to the soft sound coming from outside. There was no window in the room, from where she could peep out, so Megha just listened intently. She wondered if she should wake up Vasudha when there was a soft sound against the door. She was wondering whether she should wake up Vasudha when to her surprise something was pushed into the room from below the door. It was a red string, with a crude kind of locket hanging from it. It was knotted at the ends to make like a garland. It was very ordinary looking but when she picked it up, she was surprised to find that it felt heavier than it looked. She took the garland near the single earthen lamp, which they always left burning in one corner, so as to examine it better. She was careful to make no noise as she moved. Some instinct inside her was advising her caution. In the light of the lamp, she examined the object more closely. Then she noticed.

What she had taken as a crudely shaped locket, in the middle of the garland, was actually a small wooden figurine. On closer examination, it looked like a miniature doll, whose face had not been stamped into any features but the hands and legs were clear enough. It was like a small doll. The workmanship could hardly be called fine. Megha found herself thinking that her devoted Madhav would have done a much better job than this. However, on scrutinizing the face of the wooden doll carefully, she saw some crude marks on it. One was a near circle, though not very smoothly executed and a small arrow moving away from it. The circle could easily be construed as a moon or a ball or for that matter, anything of circular shape but the arrow was more distinctive. It was quite straight and deeply entrenched into the wood. However, the weight was a surprise. Then Megha noticed that the head of the doll was a separate piece which could be opened if rotated gently. On doing so, she found that the inside was hollow though not empty. It contained a shiny pebble, the kind often found on river beds. The currents of a fast moving river must have eroded and smoothed its edges, so that the pebble was almost a perfect round and flat. The colour was ordinary but it was still a pretty piece. A kind of pretty pebble that she herself might have picked up, if she were walking along a river bed. In fact, Megha found herself thinking that perhaps it was a sort of token that signified an innocent friendship or even a first love.

She held the object in her hand, wondering what she should do. She glanced at the door to see if there was any further action there. All had gone quiet again. Whoever, had been here to push this thing through the bottom of the door, was now gone.

Surely, it was a message and since she herself could not make any head or tail about it, the cryptic message had to be for Vasudha, the only other occupant of this isolated dwelling. She tried to think this thing through. If Vasudha had been expecting any such message to come through, it would be far more likely that Vasudha would have stayed awake or at least in a more alert frame of mind. Yet, Vasudha was fast asleep, which seemed odd to Megha. Was the message then, not being expected by the girl? Or was it some kind of code that would convey something to Vasudha, like a certain course of action? The suspense and secrecy, Megha had encountered in the last few months had honed her own suspiciousness. The question haunting her now was whether this message, delivered so covertly, yet so carelessly that Megha and not the servant girl, had got hold of it, dangerous for herself? If that turned out to be the case, then shouldn't she keep it hidden?

Unable to answer her own questions, she decided to hide the object upon her own person for the time being. As she turned to go to her own bed, Vasudha seemed to stir. Megha froze but the girl had just been turning in her sleep and did not wake up. Noiselessly, Megha lay down on her bed and tried to get some sleep. Her mind was too much in turmoil to grant her the restfulness of a good sleep but eventually her tiredness and darkness of the night put her to sleep.

She woke up after some hours to find herself alone. For a minute, she was surprised but then realized that it was hardly so odd. The light from the opening near the ceiling was quite bright, so it must be quite late in the morning. The room was locked from outside, which obviously implied that Vasudha was up and about. The girl could be in the garden outside or she might be far away from the house at this moment, for all Megha knew. The

strange event of the previous night came back to her mind. She felt the temptation to bring out the object, hidden in her clothes , so as to examine it better in the daylight but was afraid, lest she should be discovered doing so. As if echoing her thoughts, the door opened and there stood Vasudha, with a parcel in her hands. She also looked quite flushed, as if she had walked a certain distance. However, her youthful face broke into a pleased smile on seeing Megha.

“Oh, you are awake! Good. We have a lot to do.” She blurted out, almost happily.

Megha would have liked to ask what this was about but kept silent although she did return the girl’s smile.

“Here is your food. Get bathed quickly and have some thing. Then you need to be dressed.” Vasudha continued as she kept the parcel on the floor and started taking out the food packets from it.

It struck Megha as how everything she was given here, seemed to come from outside. There was no cooking utensil in the house, not even a knife to cut any fruits or anything. Vasudha brought the food from outside, served it to Megha on a wooden plate and once she had eaten, took everything away. An earthen pitcher filled with water and an earthen tumbler to drink from, was all that was allowed in this room. Yet the quality and quantity of the food served to her had never been dissatisfactory in any aspect. They were keeping her well fed, well clothed and in reasonable comfort. The only thing, she did not have was freedom to come and go as she pleased. Hardly any outside news ever reached her. Also, a considerable number of days had passed since Veer’s last visit. This last point caused Megha considerable discomfort.

She was musing on her situation as she ate the food. She had already completed her morning ablutions, including a bath. The string with the crude figurine shaped locket was pressed against her skin, hidden among her clothes, as she thought about last night’s strange event. She was still not sure as whether she was doing the prudent thing by keeping it secret from her jailor cum servant. Vasudha today, seemed to be in high spirits. She was talking more than usual and there seemed to be an excited, almost delighted energy to her actions. More than once, she urged Megha to eat faster and get ready. Megha would have liked to ask , what all this urgency was about but she had got so used to not ask any questions that she could not bring herself to enquire.

There was another parcel waiting for her when she came back from her bath. Vasudha opened it to reveal the most beautiful dress she had ever seen. It was a *lehenga choli*, comprising of light silk , studded with pretty stones all over. The dupatta specially, was heavily ornamented. She had no doubt it was extremely costly and she could not imagine what its arrival implied. Was it a gift from the king? Perplexed as she was, she decided that if it was indeed a gift, it might actually mean she had found favour in the royal eyes. Maybe the evidence she told veer and the king about had been duly recovered and her story was now proved correct. The thought cheered her but a little voice inside her advised caution even then.

She looked at Vasudha in askance but Vasudha only smiled and did not say anything. The new clothes were in fact again wrapped up and stowed away in a small chest in one corner of the room. However, Megha was not to enjoy much privacy that day. Unexpectedly, she had one more visitor that day. A middle aged woman who turned out to be a tailor. It soon became clear that the job of this lady was to take Megha's measurements, so as to ensure that the dress she had been shown earlier, fitted her perfectly. Megha had expected that this lady would take the necessary measurements and then leave with the dress to work on it later but she was proved wrong. This lady had brought all her tailoring tools with her and set to work on the dress in one corner of the room. Vasudha of course was there to supervise the lady the whole time. Though the atmosphere was one of relaxed preparation, Megha found herself resenting the further lack of privacy which these proceedings entailed. However, she had no choice in the matter and tried to spend the day, watching the garden outside. A part of her wished that it would rain. A nice, cool shower might have soothed her nerves but it looked like it was going to be a dry day. All she could do was gaze wistfully at the clouds floating by in the sky above but no raindrops were forthcoming.

Nevertheless, it turned out that she was able to take a brief nap after her afternoon meal and somehow felt calmer in the evening. Her dress had by that time been altered and was lying, neatly packed in the chest in the corner of the room. It was a lovely dress and at some other time of her life, Megha would have been delighted at the prospect of wearing it. Now, she didn't know what to think. She struggled to keep her thoughts positive and her outward demeanor relaxed. The wooden doll still pressed against her dress and she was thankful that through all these proceedings she had been able to keep it hidden. A light wooden partition in one of the corners of the room, was all the privacy she was allowed.

Megha took more time with her dinner than usual, so it was later than the usual time when she finally went to bed. Maybe that was the reason that she was having difficulty going to sleep. Also, the night was a little too warm for comfort. Still she did doze off for a while though her sleep was fitful. She found herself awake and decided to visit the outhouse. No sound came from Vasudha's side. She walked to the girl's bed and gently awoke her. Vasudha got up immediately which caused Megha to wonder if she had already been awake. Megha made her request. Vasudha unlocked the door of the room and they walked silently towards the outhouse which was situated at the far end of the garden. As was always the custom, Megha closed the door of the outhouse, with Vasudha standing a little farther away from the outhouse door. On coming out, Megha couldn't see Vasudha. She was surprised as Vasudha had never done that before. Megha started walking back to her room when a sound caught her attention. It seemed to be a horse galloping away.

The realization sent a warning signal to her head but listening intently, she concluded that whatever horse that was, was galloping away rather than approaching her. That eased her heart a little but she still hesitated and hung back for a few moments. She even wondered if staying in the shade of the trees was a good idea. Vasudha might have just walked away and would most likely come back soon to collect her. However, when no Vasudha appeared, her perplexity increased. She once again started walking and reached the door of her room. She entered the room about to call out to the girl when something made her halt. Something, she felt, was not right. The house was too silent, almost as if she was the only

one on the premises. The door to her room was wide open and without looking in she knew that it was empty. Where was Vasudha? She could not have gone out to the outhouse as Megha had just come from there. Most importantly, it was not like the vigilant girl to leave Megha unescorted and go off somewhere. Megha was afraid to call out. Finally she entered the room and though everything looked normal, she knew something was out of order. There was absolutely no sign of Vasudha.

She walked back to the garden looking around. Then she noticed. The outward gate, which she had never seen open till date, was standing ajar. The sight of the same so unnerved her that her heart began to race. Here she was, all alone in this house, where she had been kept a prisoner for past some time and suddenly she seemed to have been abandoned by her jailor. Megha could not interpret her own feelings. Is this how birds, who had been caged for long felt if the cage door was suddenly found open one day? Should she make a dash for freedom or wait patiently for someone to come and claim her?

She willed her mind to think calmly and concluded that the sound of the galloping horse she had heard ,definitely had something to do with this situation. Megha could not have just gone away like this. Either she had left willingly or been carried away by force. What surprised her most was how fast the whole unnatural situation had materialized. After having completed her ablutions, she had taken a few moments more to splash a handful of water on her face to derive some comfort from the warm stuffiness of the night. Surely she had not that long in the outhouse and now Vasudha had disappeared and she had no idea as what she should do.

She took a good look at the room. The earthen lamp in the corner was still burning. Both the beds, Megha's as well as Vasudha's looked same as they had been left and nothing else had been touched. Suddenly it hit Megha. The wooden doll that she had kept hidden within her blouse was no longer there.

She racked her mind to remember when she had last seen or felt its presence within the folds of her dress, but nothing seemed to come to her mind. She couldn't even recollect if she had sensed the doll nestled against her bosom when she woke tonight and was shaking Vasudha awake.

She thought for a few minutes and decided that she needed to calm herself. The first thing to do, she decided, was to check if she was truly alone at this moment or could someone be lurking somewhere within the premises. The room was a bare one. No hidden corners or cupboards anywhere to hide any secrets. There was another room adjacent to her room. Only one day, she had walked in there. It had some stuff stowed away in a corner but nothing that could conceal anyone hiding. She nevertheless checked it. The outhouse she dismissed. She herself had been the one occupying it when Vasudha seemed to have disappeared and she had not heard any sound nearby when she came out. The garden, specially the slightly dense grove at the far end was a possible hiding place. The thought of going there alone and looking around was scary to the young girl at this moment. So,

she hesitated. She returned to her room and barred the door, leaning against the door. At least for the time being, she felt safe. At least, anyone wishing to do her any harm couldn't get at her. She walked up to her bed and sat down on it, thinking what she was supposed to do now.

She looked around the room and realized that except the clothes on her body right now and some more pieces of clothing which Vasudha used to supply her as required, there was not much stuff also of her own here. Then she remembered the dress which had recently been tailored for her. It should be in the trunk in the corner, unless Vasudha had taken it away with her. She checked and surely enough, it was there, neatly packed just as it had been placed by Vasudha's careful hands earlier.

She knew it was madness to even think of leaving on her own and even more so to think of carrying this dress with her on this uncertain journey but a voice inside her was compelling her to do exactly that. It couldn't be normal that the guard entrusted to keep her captive should suddenly disappear and she should continue to live here as if nothing had changed. Also she reasoned, without Vasudha, she wouldn't even know as how to arrange for her food and all, in this house. The house did not contain any kitchen or any other kind of provisions that could enable a person to survive for long. Even the trees in the garden were hardly rich, fruit laden ones that one could live on for long! There was nothing to do, she concluded. She must leave this place immediately and she would take the expensive dress with her.

She quickly picked up the soft blanket which had been given to her for the cool nights and wrapped it around her. The package with the dress wrapped in it, she held against her bosom and let the shawl glide over it, effectively hiding it. She was glad that it was a light one. It might not be warm enough for a cold night but anything bigger or heavier would be too clumsy to handle in this uncertain flight of hers. Covering her head with it and obscuring her face as much as possible, she stepped out of the room. She walked determinedly to the open main gate, she had seen a few moments earlier and walked out of the premises. There was no one about and all was still. Since, she had no idea where this house was located as such, she had no sense of direction also. She randomly chose one direction and started walking.

Megha had been walking for quite some time, when the day began to break. The path she was on was a lonely one and she was both glad as well as relieved to have met no one so far. At last she came to a small pond and could see a small but sturdy house situated some distance away. There were no other houses in the vicinity and Megha was thirsty. She drank some water and washed her face. Despite the cool morning air, the touch of the water was refreshing. There were some trees on one side. She decided to hide there and rest for a while. After some time, a couple of young girls came out of the house. They had some dirty utensils in their hands, which they were obviously going to wash at the pond side. They were chatting as they approached the pond and after a while she could make out their words. They were talking about normal everyday stuff like most young girls did. It was both comforting and disturbing for Megha to hear their simple talk. Comforting because it seemed to imply that ordinary life still went on while she had been living in imprisonment

all this time. Disturbing because she felt so very removed from that normal, everyday existence!

At last she decided to venture out. Maybe she could ask these girls for help. At max, they would take her for a beggar and shoo her away. Hopefully she wouldn't rouse any unnecessary suspicions.

So, she gently came out of the grove of trees and approached the girls. One of them was carrying on about how difficult her mistress was to please while the other was making the appropriate commiserating sounds to encourage the tale along.

She had still not spoken a word when the girl talking looked at her askance. Megha realized how noiselessly she had come forward. Maybe her recent experiences had skilled her in the art of stealth and caution. She gathered her presence of mind and started on the tale she had thought out beforehand. How she had been visiting a fair with her Uncle and somehow had got separated from him, so that she had now no idea as where she was and where she was to go. However, she had a relative whom they were planning to visit anyway, so if she could reach there, then it would be all right. If only these girls could give her an idea about her whereabouts, she would be grateful. She hoped she looked harassed enough for them to believe her tale but not bedraggled enough to discourage them from having anything to do with her. The girl looking at her, despite all her cribbing, had kind eyes and Megha continued talking resolutely. They heard her out patiently enough and gave her directions to the nearest market town. She was just about to turn away after saying her thanks, when the other girl said something that made her halt.

"You might as well try going in the direction of the king's palace. The king seems in a good mood nowadays and giving away more alms and gifts away than he ever did before. You might be lucky enough to get something for yourself to help you on the road. It might be even easier to enquire after your uncle there than anywhere else."

"Yes, she is right. A cousin of mine works in the royal kitchen and she was saying that they are all expecting some big announcement soon." The first girl agreed.

Megha was intrigued and requested the girls as what they meant, which the young girls had no problem in clarifying.

"Everyone is saying that there is talking of a wedding. Even the lowliest of kitchen servants are putting together their wardrobes for the royal celebration expected."

"Do you mean the prince's wedding?" Megha tried to keep her voice nonchalant with only the amount of interest that any commoner would feel in a royal wedding. Inside, her heart was racing with surprise at this unexpected news.

"It might be. It might also be a double wedding".

"Double wedding?" Now Megha could not disguise the surprise in her voice. As far as Megha knew, the prince had no known siblings. Who else was important enough to share in a royal event?

“It is that friend of his. The commander of the forces. At least that is what my cousin thinks. The prince and he have been like chums since they were babies. They even had the same wet nurse as the *senapati* had lost his mother at an early age and the queen had been gracious to offer her own son’s wet nurse to the motherless boy. They are more like brothers than friends and now that the old king is dead, those two are at the helm of the kingdom. There is no one the king trusts more than his childhood friend.” The girl was happily prattling on, her recent complaints against her difficult mistress quite forgotten.

Megha was stunned. Luckily the girls were too engrossed in this royal topic to take much notice of the consternation on her face.

“But what about the mourning period? Don’t they have to wait for some defined period after the old king’s death before such a big celebration?” Megha had to ask.

“Oh, that they will wait for surely.” One of the girls replied patiently.

Megha was silent for a few minutes, while she tried to collect her thoughts. How much time had elapsed since the royal death? She realized that this piece of information had really taken her by surprise. Now, as she reflected upon it, she realized that it could very well have been. After all, no one had really suspected the old king to have been murdered as such. If that strange messenger had not tumbled upon her and her father’s life that fatal night, they too would never have suspected a thing. Since, her flight from her house, she had stayed at two different places, in hiding both times, with very minimal outside contact. First, at the abandoned house of her uncle and these last months as a royal captive, guarded over by Vasudha. The passage of time seemed to have been swifter than she had realized.

Instinctively, she clutched at the bundle in her arms. As she did so, she realized that the only thing inside the package in her hand was that extremely expensive and beautiful dress that had been tailor-fitted for her own self. A stab of anguish went through her. Was this why she had been gifted the lovely dress, so that she could also join in the festivities? Her rational mind hastened to assure her that receipt of such gift could only mean beneficial for her. Had she been deemed a royal traitor, she would hardly be loaded with expensive gifts like the one she was holding. However, mind, for all its intelligent rationality, hardly offers any comfort to a disappointed heart. That irrational organ of her body had absorbed only one fact in all these conjectures and was now threatening to fill not only her heart but also her eyes with undiluted sorrow. That fact was that “*He* was getting married to someone else”.

A more rational and emotionally unaffected Megha might have lingered to gossip or glean some more handy information to aid her immediate purpose. The heart broken girl, however, had to turn away, listlessly following the road which the girls had pointed out to her. It might have been comforting to sit down and have a good cry but with these two strange girls chattering away on that one topic, which broke her heart, she had no choice but to leave as quickly as her tired feet could carry her.

The tale weavers

“Hmm! So, finally we get proof of this mysterious artist also. An artist who was talented but doesn’t seem to have received much formal training. His art pieces are pretty and well-executed but lack that polish which comes with proper teaching.” Manjula said thoughtfully while taking down the cups and saucers from the kitchen shelf.

The three women were in the kitchen, preparing the evening tea and snacks. Sweta had apprised them of her hunch and its eventual corroboration.

“Yeah, it is really eerie, isn’t it? Laali’s and our story is right on track with this new information. Megha comes to her Uncle’s house seeking asylum. She is given a place to stay in a small hidden room at the back of the house, where not many people venture. The only person who comes and goes there, mainly to bring her food and other necessities is a young, dumb boy whom no one notices. This boy happens to have artistic talents but no one gives him much importance because he is poor and dumb. In fact that is the reason, he is assigned the task of carrying things to Megha because he is too insignificant and considered an idiot, to be taken seriously. No one will ever suspect him of anything.”

Kajal’s narrative here was interrupted by Manjula.

“Just a minute. The artistic part is all right but how do you know about his being dumb or poor? There is nothing specific pointing towards either.”

“Yeah, Manju is right. We cannot assume he is either dumb or poor, except that this region does not seem to have boasted too much wealth, either now or in the past. There might have been some rich men, like Megha’s uncle but the servants are expected to have been mostly locals and they might not have been too well off. Still, it is only our conjecture and regarding dumb, we know nothing in that direction.” As usual, this practical summarization was Sweta’s contribution.

“Well then, it is one of those blanks which the storyteller has to fill in. It is really surprising that all of us, including Laali and even Kunal and Atul seemed quite sure that the boy was ‘dumb’ and ‘poor’. Manjula replied in a practical tone.

“Maybe that is the way imagination works. We are all so used to hearing stories where the protagonists are poor and their helpers often have a handicap.” Kajal ventured, while frying some fritters.

“Maybe it is Megha’s eyes.”

Both Kajal and Manjula glanced at the Sweta as she made the last comment. There had been something very soft in the way, she had uttered the words.

“Yes, Megha’s eyes, have you noticed them in the portrait? The portrait does not seem very formal, i.e. not a proper posing and all, as expected for a proper painting. Yet there seems to be a sense of patience about it. As if she is humouring someone for whom she has a certain degree of compassion and can’t bring herself to say no. It might be that Megha was

simply a nice natured girl who didn't like to disappoint people. It might also be that she feels a certain level of sympathy for the painter. This sympathy might be because of the poverty of the said person or something more inherent like a physical deformity. Since, his handiwork is there for all of us to see, I assume his hands are definitely healthy and capable. Dumbness or some sort of mental deficiency seems more like it. In fact, it is not uncommon to find that a not so smart child often is good with his hands while being deficient in learning alphabets or numbers.' Sweta concluded.

Kajal nodded her acceptance.

"Yes, you may be right, Sweta. I guess we will never really be clear about this point." Manjula said with a shrug.

The next few moments were quiet as the girls went about their work.

"You know what, I miss the guys. I mean Atul and Kunal." Sweta suddenly started.

Both her friends looked at her with something of an amused surprise.

"Oh well, Sweta. They are about the house somewhere, I am sure. Just call out if you want them." Manjula said with a laugh.

"No, no. not that way!" Sweta hastened to explain. "I mean, about this story telling. We no longer discuss it with them. It might have been interesting to hear what they made of all this."

"Oh that! They did complete the story after all and I am sure they have lost interest by now! It is not the kind of stuff men bother about too long. If they heard us now, they would say, we are just going on and on too much about it. In fact, perhaps even we wouldn't go on so if we were back in the city. Busy with, like a hundred things. Here, in this house, with all this rain all around us, this story seems to take a life of its own."

Manjula had said all this in a rush, except for the last part, where her voice had turned a little dreamy.

Sweta opened her mouth like to say something but didn't. After all, she thought, these girls surely knew their husbands better than she was did. She was the unmarried one here and to her, Atul and Kunal were still guys. Guys, as in friends, with whom you discuss things, hangout and crack a joke now and then. Even if they made fun of her sometimes, it only left her a little exasperated but never deeply disappointed. Manjula and Kajal, on the other hand, had gone on to marry these men, who had started out as friends and were now their wedded life partners. Maybe their perspectives now differed. She decided not to press the point.

The snacks and tea were anyway ready and it was time to join the men for the evening tea.

Despite the reservations of their respective wives, it soon became clear that the ‘guys’ had not lost interest in Megha’s story completely.

After some small talk, Atul brought it up. “So, now that we have completed Megha’s tale, what is next? Any more challenges for us men?”

His voice held a smile like always, but he was surprised when he got no response. He briefly glanced at Kunal who, sipping his tea appreciatively, showed no reaction.

Sweta quickly glanced at the two other girls and when it became clear that neither Manjula nor Kajal had any intention of speaking, decided to take matters into her own hands. Why not, she thought. It is not some big state secret, just some harmless story making with friends, in a relaxed environment.

She placed her cup on the center table and told them everything. First about Laali’s story and then about the discovery of the symbol.

“Whew! You gals have been busy! And kept us in the dark too! That was not fair!” Kunal ejaculated when she finished.

Now that it was all out, it seemed Manjula and Kajal could not stop speaking. Soon, the quiet tea party was transformed into a vivacious discussion, first about the story itself and then the speculations about the mysterious artist who had carved so many beautiful miniatures for his patroness, who they were all sure, was none other than their own Megha. Manjula even made a trip to the attic room to bring down some pieces to let them compare the symbol with that on the bottom right of the picture. They even talked about the sketch which Sweta had drawn before actually having seen Megha’s painting. It was quite a pleasant discussion, so much so that no one, except Atul, noticed that it had started raining again. Atul was comparatively quiet as he listened to them all. He was thinking about that sketch he himself had made the first night. He had never shown it to anyone, but it had continued to irk him nevertheless. Now, seemed like a good time to share it with everyone.

He slipped out of the room quietly and returned with it. Since everyone seemed wrapped up in the discussion, he didn’t interrupt. Instead, he placed the sketch quietly on the center table and waited for someone to take notice. The first person to take notice was Sweta, who picked it up and was gazing at it in deep concentration when the others noticed.

“What is it?” Kajal asked her.

Sweta handed over the sketch to Kajal who had asked the question. Manjula too was now peering at the sketch in Kajal’s hand. They both looked up at Sweta, their eyes asking her a question. Sweta slowly nodded her head to answer them with a no. Atul was watching all three of them carefully. There was no doubt that some unspoken conversation was going on between these ladies. Only Kunal was unperturbed and eventually broke the tension by asking who had made the sketch. The sketch was handed over to him and as he admired it, Atul cleared his throat.

The three women immediately looked at him.

He looked from one to the other and finally locking his eyes with that of Manjula, dropped his bombshell.

“I made this sketch. Does it remind you of someone?”

“Yes of course, it is Megha although the angle of her face is slightly inverted, as if she is looking at something in the distance. Nice capture, Atul!” Kunal complimented, handing over the sketch to his Atul.

Atul did not take it back as Kunal expected him to. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and took another sip from his tea cup. It seemed like a gesture of leisure but only Manjula could sense the urgency behind it.

“I made this sketch, the first night we all came here. You remember how heavily it rained that night. I couldn’t sleep, so took up the sketchbook and this is what I drew. I would have just casually shown it to you guys perhaps but next day, Manjula found this painting and I was so surprised by the uncanny resemblance that I did not know what to say. I have since then thought of sharing it with you all, especially with Manjula but always hesitated. Now, on hearing Laali’s story and Sweta’s enthusiasm about the symbol, I thought why not tell?” Atul shrugged here.

No one spoke for a minute.

Again, it was Kunal who broke the silence.

“You mean, you too drew an exact resemblance of Megha even though you had never seen the actual painting before? Whew! Isn’t that too much of a coincidence? Both you and Sweta!” Kunal threw his hands up in the air as he summed up the situation.

“Eerie! That is what it is!” This came from Kajal but for once, even Kunal did not protest with a flippant remark. They all stayed silent for a few moments, the only sound being that of the rain falling incessantly outside.

“So, let us sum up the situation so far.” Kunal’s voice was matter of fact.

“So, we find this portrait of a girl in this house. An obvious guess is that she might have lived in this house at some point of time. We all decide to guess or rather make up a story about this girl, whom we name as Meghmala or Megha in short. Nothing strange so far. The strangeness is that even before this portrait was discovered, two of us drew exact likenesses of her, purely from their own imagination. Now, the question is how did it happen?” Kunal said.

“I guess a psychologist will have some theories. They will say that consciously or unconsciously both Sweta and Atul might have glimpsed Megha’s portrait, without their remembering and that is how they drew it.” Manjula offered.

“No way, I came to this house and for that matter in this very village for the first time and on the very first night, drew this sketch. We had not even started on our story making session then, remember?” Sweta was emphatic in her denial.

“Same with me. Although I had visited the house earlier but I don’t remember spotting any such painting at all. In fact the attic room where Manjula discovered this painting was the only one I never took much interest in. So, having seen her or and not remembering the same is simply out of question.” Atul too was quite firm in his denial.

“Another point you have to remember is that even Laali recognized the picture although she too had never seen the portrait before. In fact, she saw her face in her dream, when she slept in this house, one rainy night.” Manjula reminded the group.

“Hmm. It is too much of a coincidence. Three people visualizing a face none of them had seen before. Atul, Sweta and little Laali.” Kunal summed it up.

“It is raining again.” This comment was from Kajal and with some surprise the others noted that she was right. They had been so immersed in their discussion that none had noticed the familiar sound of gentle rain, which had started while they had been busy talking.

Kajal went on. Her voice had suddenly taken a calm and dreamy tone as she uttered this. “Have you noticed as how it always rains whenever we take up this tale? Almost as if rain is a part of this story! Megha’s story. A story of a girl whose very name means the cloud, from which the rains come.”

Kajal had been gazing outside at the falling rain as she uttered these words. Now, she suddenly turned around to face them all. There was a strange gleam in her soft eyes.

“Yes, rain! It is always a catalyst to our story telling. We have never paid much attention to it but don’t you guys see? Both Atul and Sweta drew their pictures from their imagination while it was heavily raining. The only time Laali had her dream of Megha’s story was when she and her folks were forced to stay on in this house because of heavy rains. Even this story came to us, always with the rain falling outside.”

No one, not even Kunal, said anything to this strange outburst.

A couple of seconds passed before the silence of the room was broken by Manjula.

“Maybe it is much simpler than that, Kajal.”

As everyone looked at her, she went on to elaborate, though in a halting, uneasy manner.

“Maybe it just good, old-fashioned case of haunting. This house was perhaps Megha’s house and in some way, what all of us are experiencing is a haunted house. I have never believed in this kind of stuff but it seems like an explanation.”

“But that cannot be! Megha’s story is mostly a happy one. At least both Laali’s and our version, which were narrated independent of each other agreed on the same. Megha found happiness in this house. She went through a lot but eventually, she found happiness.” Sweta’s voice had a note of incredulity in it.

“So, who says that only sorrow can haunt?” This was from Atul.

“Haunted by happiness? Whoever heard of that? Everyone knows that it is sorrow and injustice which haunt a place!” Kunal’s expression seemed to say that he could not believe that others could be so naïve as not to know this fundamental truth about hauntings.

At this point, Atul laughed.

Do you all realize one thing? This is not the first time we are discussing the dynamics of haunting. The earlier discussion also took place, in the same house, only few days back.”

They all stared at him as gradually the truth of his words dawned on them all.

Assured that he had everyone’s attention, he continued in his theory.

“As Kunal said, we are all fixated on this theory that only unhappiness can cause hauntings. Why? Have we wondered? Well, I will tell you what I think. It is because there is a sense of unfinished business about unhappiness or injustice. So, it seems to linger, in form of a haunting. As if the person who experiences the unhappiness or injustice cannot let it go and leaves something behind. Some vibes which seem to hang around a place or an object, providing it with an atmosphere. That is what is termed as a haunting. Now, consider what is likely to happen if instead of experiencing profound unhappiness, someone experiences profound happiness! The positive vibes created by it dissipate away because we human beings feel the sorrow more strongly or rather dwell more upon it than we dwell upon the happy events of our life. Moreover, there is a sense of completion about happiness. Maybe that is why, for all its beauty and warmth, it fails to linger. So, no sense of haunting ever gets generated because of it.”

Here Atul paused, as if waiting to see the reaction of his little lecture. Everyone else had an attentive look on their faces.

It was kajal who spoke now and when she did, she expounded further on Atul’s theory.

“In a way, Atul is right. We all experienced it. There was a sense of happiness about the house which we all felt. We even discussed it at the time. Remember, Manjula? Remember Sweta? At that time, we all accepted the obvious explanation that it was nothing more than the happiness and relaxation induced by a vacation away from the stress and business of our daily, city lives. Maybe, it was more than that. We felt this happiness not just because

we were on a vacation but also because of the existing atmosphere of the house. Strange as it may sound to all of us, this house is perhaps haunted. Haunted by happiness!”

This speech, odd as it was, was met with complete silence by the people in the room. Except for the gentle sound of the rain falling outside, there was no other sound in the room. It had a strange sense of soothing, the sound of rain falling outside.

As usual, Kunal was the first one to recover. He let go a soft sigh before muttering to himself. “Some theory it is. Goes against the grain completely but can’t say I don’t believe it. In some way, it makes sense to me.”

He raised his eyes to look at his wife and found her looking intently at him. Yet, he could spot the enigmatic smile in those dark eyes. He smiled back at her. Kajal responded with a more explicit smile and the next moment, she clapped her hands to happily exclaim.

“Well if we have converted Kunal the sceptic, then we have done something for sure. Far-fetched as it is, the theory definitely has got some potential.”

This exultation on her part succeeded in breaking the spell in the room but it was obvious from the partly surprised and partly dreamy look on each of the faces that the idea had affected each one of them. Instead of brushing it away, they were all turning it over in their minds, while listening to the swishing sound of rain outside.

In a way, they were all experiencing the atmosphere of the house. A house which, contrary to all respected laws of nature, seemed to be haunted by happiness. Maybe it was not right to call it haunted. Maybe the better expression was to describe it as lingering or concentration of the positive vibes which intense joy creates. Somehow, those vibes, instead of fritting away, had lingered on, becoming a part of the fiber of whatever makes up the atmosphere of a house.

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“Now that we have completed the story, only two things I cannot be sure about. You can say, they are the loose ends of this perfect solution.”

This comment was from Manjula as she continued taking out the little toy figurines from the old trunk. They were going back to the city the next day and Manjula had insisted that they each take at least one item from this trunk as a memento. The guys had announced their decision to take a nap after lunch, so the girls had come up to the attic room, with tea cups and a pot of tea. It had been raining since lunch and although an afternoon siesta would have been relaxing, today being their last day in the house, the trio had decided to make the most of it.

“Now, what is that?” Kajal asked absently while carefully looking at the figurine in her hand.

“First, the story is rather vague as what Megha did when she left those girls by the pond side chattering away about the expected royal wedding. Neither Laali nor the guys seem to have much to say on that. Next we hear that Megha despite having any sense of her whereabouts, somehow managed to find her way back to her Uncle’s house. It is worth recommending that even in her distressed state, she had the presence of mind to somehow find his house and also not draw too much attention to herself when she reached it. She actually did not knock on it until it was late night, under the cover of darkness.”

“Yes, that is right. Maybe there were no story-worthy adventures on the way. So, this gap.” Sweta answered with a slight shrug.”

Since no one of her friends gave any reply, she felt the need to elaborate her point.

“I mean, it might not have been that easy after all to come back but maybe it came about more easily than can be expected usually. Maybe, the place where she had been held captive had not been that far from her Uncle’s village after all.”

“You might be right, Manjula. Yet, I have a feeling that maybe the explanation is more interesting than that.” This comment was from Kajal, in a thoughtful voice.

She did not wait for her friends to say anything but continued after a brief pause.

“I am sure that Megha, despite her caution and presence of mind, was actually rather distracted. I have a feeling that this story communicates only when Megha’s faculties are sharp. Also, Megha has this uncanny affection for rain. Maybe, it did not rain during the entire time that she was making her way back.”

“Almost as if it is rain which is the compiler and the narrator of this tale across the times and this all-important narrator was simply missing during this phase of the story.” Sweta just had to pitch in. As if the practical yet imaginative girl, simply could not but insist how this was the only possible, logical explanation for the whole thing.

Strange as such a speech might have seemed, neither Manjula nor Kajal opposed Sweta’s observation. After all, last night also, Kajal herself had voiced a similar conviction and even Kunal, the pragmatic and her ever teasing husband, had listened in a solemn silence.

In fact, Kajal herself was the first one to recover from this strange observation. She demanded of Sweta as what was the second loose ending that she had mentioned.

“Yeah, I am coming to that. I was thinking of the wooden doll which was dropped in Megha’s room one night. Remember, the hand carved one that Megha found when Vasudha was asleep. The one she kept hidden on her person. In fact, she lost it the night Vasudha disappeared.”

“Oh, that is not exactly a loose end, Sweta. After all, we do know the story behind it. Don’t we?” Manjula replied after some reflection.

“The wooden doll. It was actually not our Megha’s story, but we do know the truth about it. It was a token from a guy who had once been in love with Vasudha and happening to find out that she had been seen entering and leaving that house, had dropped the same to make himself known to the girl. However, our Vasudha never got the intended message, as it was appropriated by our Megha. In fact, it had slipped from the folds of her dress that night when she woke up Vasudha, to ask her to let her go to the outhouse. In her excited state, she thought it must signify something when it had nothing to do with her at all.”

“Cannot really blame her. When you are being kept a captive with a stranger, for having told a tale of betrayal to the king of her land, you are kind of entitled to suspect every little thing. Remember girls, the manner of this doll coming her way was quite suspicious in its own way. In the dead of night, in a stealthy manner. Naturally, it piqued our Megha’s imagination.” Kajal supplied in a convinced voice.

“How amazing, even our plain Jane Vasudha had her own love story.” Sweta uttered in a wondering voice.

“Now, now, girls. Nowhere has it been said that Vasudha was plain looking. Just because she was charged with guarding Megha, we kind of assumed that she must be one of those hard featured , taciturn girls employed for tough jobs. She might very well have been a pretty village maiden who had once played with such a doll, given to her by a childhood admirer.” Manjula admonished.

“Yes, a village maiden who came to this profession not because she had a taste for such jobs but because she had fallen on tough times herself. After all, she is working for the king, mind you. However, this childhood admirer who had been separated from her quite some time, happens to find her eventually and wishes to reconnect with her. Failing to do so, he manages to smuggle this artifact into the room where he has spotted his childhood love go in.” Sweta continued with the tale, in her practical manner.

“Isn’t it amazing how things happen. Just imagine, here was this doll left for Megha’s guard to find. Had Vasudha found it, she would have known that she was being invited to elope with her lost love of childhood on a certain night. However, it mistakenly falls into Megha’s hands and just on that night, when the elopement was promised, it slips from Megha’s dress, as she is walking towards the outhouse and is noticed by Vasudha. Immediately, the girl picks it up and realizing its significance, looks around hoping to see her admirer. She rushes out of the property and is united with her friend who had been lurking outside, hoping against hope that his lady love would step out.”

“Rest, as they say, is history. In Megha’s absence, Vasudha makes the decision of her life. She cannot leave with this man but must converse with him once and explain her situation. After all, she has been given an assignment by no other than the king himself. She can’t just run off like a common country girl. Her admirer tries to convince her of the danger she

is in and how leaving the premises of this kingdom at the earliest is the best option for her future but the girl is determined. I must say, I was mighty surprised when I heard who Vasudha was!” Kajal had now taken up the flow in her soft and dreamy voice.

“Yes, that was quite a surprise. To think that Vasudha, whom we thought no more than a daring country girl, in the employ of the king, was none other than the younger sister of the man who revealed the conspiracy to Megha and her father in the first place. The injured stranger who started it all when he stumbled into their house and breathed his last.” Sweta murmured in a wondering voice.

“In a way, Megha and Vasudha were two of a kind. They were both hunted and living dangers to the conspirators who had killed the old king. Just as our Megha had done, Vasudha had thrown herself to her prince’s mercy when her brother did not return for more than two days. She had been warned by her brother to do so if such a situation came but unlike Megha, she had never had any concrete proofs to produce. Still, her life was as much in danger as Megha or her father. Perhaps, more so because with respect to them, the conspirators’ were never sure as how much they knew. There was always this chance that the stranger might have died before revealing the secret and the father and daughter might be knowing nothing. In case of Vasudha, she had been the sister of the man himself.” Manjula summed up the comparison between the two girls.

“I must say, I almost liked Vasudha better than our Megha when I heard her story. It was such a twist in the tale.” Kajal blurted out.

“Yes it was. Still it amazes me as how Vasudha, who was put in charge of Megha, was the staunchest ally the girl could have. Maybe that is why she was made her companion in the first place. The king and his commander of forces would have had this unflinching faith that this girl, out of sisterly loyalty for her brother’s sacrifice, would never betray Megha’s safety or sell out to her enemies. At the same time, by removing her from public domain, they could keep her safe also. Our Megha always thought that Vasudha was her sole companion while the fact was that they were both being guarded heavily and kept safe. Even when Vasudha used to seemingly go out to get supplies, she was only going so far as the outer gate maybe and that too suitably disguised.” Sweta nodded emphatically as she turned over the truth of these arguments in her mind.

“How these two girls must have laughed, when they met later and compared notes! The surprise would more have been on Megha’s side though.” Manjula smiled as she envisioned this scene. Two country girls who had come through fire and could talk about it!

“Of course! No wonder, the king was so well disposed towards Vasudha. He would not have proposed a lesser girl for his best friend and the commander of forces. ‘Veer and Vasudha’ - do you think the king would have considered the alliteration aspect of the pair’s names too?” Kajal chuckled at her own wit.

All three girls laughed as they considered this. However, Sweta soon came back to the initial point of their discussion.

“Why did you call this a loose end? After all, we did hear this part of the story, from both Laali and our guys. Didn’t we, Manjula?”

Manjula nodded her acquiescence before explaining. “Yes, I accept that we did. However, what I meant was that we simply heard it, we never saw or found anything that corroborates it. I mean, like the unique design of the locket, which is stamped upon a lot many of these figurines and visible clearly in the portrait. Something like that.” Manjula shrugged as she considered the expectation in her own reasoning.

After a couple of seconds, she nodded her head again and brushed off the earlier suggestion with her next words. “I guess, I am thinking too much. Maybe this is what this house is doing to us.” Her voice now sounded amused to her friends.

Sweta’s voice however, was not so amused though as she countered the point. “No, Manjula, I do not think you are. In fact, I can think of a perfectly logical explanation for not finding any such artifact. It is because we started out with Megha’s story. If at all find any physical evidence, that seems to corroborate the story, it can be only what Megha could retain. Having dropped the wooden doll on that fateful night, it moved out of Megha’s domain and obviously does not form part of her effects anymore.”

Manjula was inclined to agree with this explanation. “Yes Sweta, you are right. It makes perfect sense, now that you put it that way. I could have tried another tack that it had sentimental value for Vasudha and she treasured it forever and so on but the unfortunate way the affair of the admirer finally turned out, that does not seem very likely.”

“Yes, that part is really disappointing. To think that this childhood admirer who had inspired affection in Vasudha’s heart once actually turned out to be a traitor to the king’s cause. He had succeeded in smuggling the wooden doll into that house and inscribed the right message on it also for luring Vasudha out. Yet, when the girl refused him in good faith, he forcefully carried her off. Surely, he must have reasoned that capturing the elusive sister of the dead spy could only earn rewards from the conspirators.”

“Hmmm, the guy was rather ambivalent, I should think. He must have been genuinely attracted to this Vasudha and if she had consented to leave with him, he would have simply taken his lady and left the kingdom that night. He would have been more than happy to leave all this behind and start afresh somewhere. However, he had underestimated the courage and steadfastness of the girl. When she refused in no uncertain terms, he decided to salvage the situation in the best possible way.

Since, he may or may not have known about Megha’s presence in the house, we cannot be sure whether capturing Megha was also part of his plan or not. Not a very nice young man for sure but no shillyshallying about him. If plan A fails, go for plan B right away.” As usual, Sweta had to wind up all the points neatly in her own objective way.

“Yes, you are right, Sweta. When I heard about his role, I was a little disbelieving at first as how he managed to get so close but if he was really in the pay of the conspirators, he might have had more resources at his disposal than an ordinary admirer. Maybe, he bribed some of the guards etc.” Manjula also summed up in a thoughtful voice.

“Makes sense. I just hope Vasudha was not too cut up about the betrayal of her childhood admirer.” Kajal said with a sigh.

“She must have been hurt and surprised, but the enormity of the situation would soon have restored her to her usual intelligent self.” Sweta assured in her calm and intelligent voice.

“Hmm, the prospect of having Veer as a husband would surely have been a comfort to the maiden’s grieving heart.” Manjula muttered after a few moments.

None of them spoke for a few moments as if trying to get into the mind of that girl who had lived all those years ago. Maybe they were each wondering as how, while weaving Megha’s story, they could get so wrapped up in Vasudha’s fate and feelings. However, there was another surprise in store for them. The discovery was made by Kajal, as she took up the task of rummaging through the contents of the trunk a few minutes later.

“Hey girls, look.” Kajal suddenly cried out. She was holding up a small wooden doll, whose description was matching the exact one they had just then been discussing. The one which had been left for Vasudha by her unfaithful admirer!

There could be no doubt about it. It was a wooden figurine, in shape of a doll, with a circle and an arrow etched on it. The head of the doll could be removed by rotating it and they discovered the hollow. The only thing missing was the smooth, pretty pebble described in the story. The workmanship was markedly inferior to that of the other objects in the trunk and the signature symbol of the artist was absent. This last point convinced the girls beyond any doubt that this was not a piece executed by Megha’s devoted Madhav but had somehow found its way to Megha’s collection.

“Whew! If I believed in telepathy or anything psychic, I would bet that our conversation about the wooden doll has brought this forth from the empty air. Yet, that cannot be the case. Surely, this wooden doll must have been here all the time without our noticing it.” Manjula exclaimed.

“Manjula, this should make you happy. Only some time back, you were complaining that the point of the wooden doll was a loose end to our perfect story and here we have found some physical evidence validating the same.” Kajal said, in a voice full of wonder.

“Yes, it does exactly that. How intriguing that it does so by negating the very premise on which we built up the explanation. Here we started on the assumption that it could not

logically be expected among Megha's possessions as it had never been meant for her, yet we end up finding it among these other things, which we are very much sure, belonged to none other than Megha." Sweta articulated with an amused laugh.

"Uncanny indeed." Kajal agreed.

"Well, we do know that Megha and Vasudha met later, so maybe this thing did exchange hands then. As a sort of token of their shared experience. The memories associated with the object might not have been very happy ones for our Vasudha but both the girls could relate to it as something that would always bind them. I am quite sure that Vasudha too must have received some token from Megha at this meeting." Manjula's voice held a deep conviction, as she declared this conclusion.

Sweta however had another idea. "It could also be that in case of Vasudha, she had another reason for giving this away. After all, the girl was going to get married very soon. Holding on to an earlier admirer's gift, that too one, which held within it the mark for promised elopement, was hardly the kind of thing, a married woman wishes to keep with herself."

"Yes, that is also quite possible. However, I am surprised that this thing at all survived the events of that night and what must have followed. But sometimes these things do happen. I will just say what I said earlier. I hope Vasudha, the great girl she was, was not too cut up about the whole thing!" Kajal's voice had a distinct note of wistfulness in it. Her sensitive heart could almost feel the anguish that such a failure of young love must inspire.

"oh well! Women can be very strange about these things. The young man, whose memento it was, did not turn out very great indeed but we did hear that he lost his life in all that followed. Death can absolve a lot of sins. Maybe Vasudha did feel sentimental about him when he died and therefore held onto his gift. She only parted with it when she was about to be married and even then, instead of throwing it away, gave it to Megha as a token. As a woman, Megha might have appreciated Vasudha's feelings and so respected them by hiding it amongst her own things."

"This part of the story will always remain a bit hazy. Though we heard that Megha and Vasudha met later in happier circumstances, none of our story narrators gave a very detailed account of this meeting. We shall never know what was really said or discussed between these two girls. This is after all a loose end." Sweta's voice held just a little note of regret as she summarized the situation.

"Oh! come on! Do not get so disheartened. So what if this part has not been handed down to us on a platter. Surely, between the three of us, we can fill the blanks!" Kajal's voice was once again excited.

"Yeah surely, why not? After all we girls started this in the place but somehow, we got left behind. First little Laali and then the guys stole a march over us. It is time, we got our own back!" She went on in an encouraging voice.

Both her friends laughed and agreed that Kajal had a point. So, once again the girls settled down to a pleasant afternoon of tea and imagination. After all, what choice did they have.! The day was a pleasant one, and it was still raining outside!

The tale

Megha was sitting quietly in her room. She was once again in her uncle's house. After some rambling about on the country roads, she had found her way back. Initially she had been a little apprehensive, so she had hung back in the shade of some trees and waited till dark before approaching the back gate of the house but her entry had gone through smoothly. Her family had joyfully informed her that the evil minister whose plotting Megha had hoped to reveal, had been exposed. He was now incarcerated and from what people said, was not long for this world. Obviously, his machinations, once revealed, the new king had shown no mercy and the man had deteriorated fast. Megha's trouble seemed to be finally over. She was now once again ensconced into the bosom of her family. Even her father was expected to come and meet her soon in her uncle's house and perhaps the two could then return to their own village.

In her aunt's words, Megha and her father could now go back to their normal lives. It should have been a cheering proposition except for the fact that Megha, in her heart, knew that nothing would ever be normal for her again. The experiences she had lived through were not destined to become just memories. They had marked this girl for all her days to come. She would live out her life in the expected way but deep inside, there would be this ache of an unfulfilled regard. A great affliction it is for the young to bear and her only hope was that the passage of time and the weight of daily responsibilities would somehow dull the ache to something more bearable.

Even the rains failed to soothe her now. They came occasionally but there seemed to be something miserly about them. The freshness, the intensity seemed to be missing as if they too had lost the zeal which had once been Megha's. Maybe they were the same as they had always been but Megha's heart was no longer tuned to it the way it had been before.

Presently, the door opened and Megha who had been sitting on the window sill looking out, moved. Her eyes filled with tears as she saw the man standing there watching her. Megha, for her all her problems and grief had never given in to helpless crying but perhaps it was the love in those watching eyes that finally shattered her. She could no longer hold herself. Like a hurt child, she rushed to embrace her father. Gone was the resolute strength of the young girl who had set out to reveal dark state secrets. All she wanted was to let go. The pain she had been holding inside her for so long spilled over, mingled with the relief and joy of reuniting with her father after so long. It should have been a sweet moment, a celebration of triumph but life is hardly so simple. Her father, though he spoke soothing words to her, did not seek to rein in her tears. Being a physician himself, perhaps he had more understanding of a person's overall well being than just the soundness of one's bodily functions. Happy as he was, to see his daughter safe again he sensed the bitterness of Megha's tears as she clung to him and wept. He did not doubt her happiness and relief at seeing him but his instinct or perhaps it was a father's heart, told him that she was weeping over something she had irrevocably lost.

Father and daughter clung together wrapped up in a moment, where love, loss and relief intermingled to bind them but also divide them. Megha's father knew he had both found his daughter but also lost her in a way.

Her Uncle's family would have happily allowed them a little more privacy together but obviously something momentous had to have happened for not only a servant but even her aunt burst into the room, a breathless expression on her face. Megha and her father were both surprised at the look on her face.

The good woman was visibly excited. Who could blame her? After all, it was not every day that her house, though a respected and prosperous one in the village, was visited by none other than the king himself. Also, since a king hardly moved alone, he had a small entourage with him. All this had obviously, both thrilled and flustered the entire household so much as to render this intrusion.

"Megha, you must come down immediately. But no, you can not just go down like this! At least change your dress and do something to your hair. You must make yourself presentable to the king. Oh! Only if we had any warning!" Her aunt was mumbling more to herself than speaking to her. However, the staunch lady had soon recovered enough to start doing the things that needed doing. She had opened the nearby trunk and taken out a dress, deemed fit for receiving a king and thrust it at Megha.

Megha, who was too stunned to say anything, looked on helplessly as her flustered aunt threw out instructions to her. Agitated, she looked at her father and was surprised that he was completely calm. He met her gaze levelly and her long experience with her father told him that he, among them all, had a better understanding of the situation. Maybe it was actual knowledge or maybe he could just guess better as what might be unfolding here.

This was, however, not the time to discuss this with her father. Megha needed to dress quickly and get down to meet the king. The next few minutes went by in a daze for her. She was made ready and presented to the king. She bowed to the royal presence and was the recipient of some praise for all her actions. What she had already guessed was confirmed to her. Yes, she was not only safe but a favoured subject now. There were questions too, about her disappearance from the safe house. She was told how much trepidation she had caused by going off like that. To some extent her curiosity was also satisfied as the true circumstances of Vasudha's disappearance were revealed to her. Her amazement knew no bounds as she realized who Vasudha was. She had not just been a country girl, serving the king but the very own sister of the man, who had stumbled injured and then died in Megha's house all those days ago. It both amazed and exhilarated her as she was brought up to date, by none other than the king himself. The king's tone was an amused one throughout this conversation, which included not only Megha but also her father, her uncle, her aunt and two of king's trusted bodyguards.

However, something seemed to be amiss. Megha felt it in her bones but dared not express anything. It was a mighty relief when the visit finally ended and the humble household was left to itself once again. However, there was no peace for Megha. Though she could leave with her aunt, her father and uncle were asked to remain behind. Obviously, the king had something more to say to them, to which the women were not supposed to be privy. So, the young girl had no choice but to return to her room and await further tidings about what the king had shared with her guardians in her absence.

Megha was seated at the window sill, wrestling with her thoughts, when the door opened again. She turned around to see her father entering. His face was calm as ever but Megha seemed to spot something like apprehension, in his eyes. Never one to hurry, he stayed motionless for a few moments before he slowly came to her and sat down near her.

From long experience, Megha knew that no amount of frenzied questioning would elicit any worthwhile response from this calm man. He would speak but only when he was comfortable to do so. Even on that fateful night, when he had realized the gravity of the secret that his dead patient had revealed to him, he had but exhibited a remarkable calmness in making his decision. So, Megha did not rush to him with questions, rather waited patiently for him to start on his own. She just stood up quietly and faced him fully, her eyes both asking as well as waiting at the same time.

“Daughter! our lives have really changed. Haven’t they?” Her father said.

Megha did not answer. She still waited.

Her father sighed. It was not an unhappy sigh, but it spoke of apprehension and weariness to his only listener.

“The king has asked me something. Something that concerns you and as your father, me too.”

He paused for a minute and then continued.

“To most people, the answer would seem obvious, but I wished to speak with you first. After all, it is your life that it most affects.”

Since Megha was still quiet, he continued.

“Megha *beti*, the king has asked for your hand in marriage. As a father, I could have accepted on your behalf but as I said, I wanted to ask you. I have never imposed anything on you before. I will not do so now. So, tell me. Is this proposal acceptable to you?”

Megha swallowed. Whatever else she had expected, this was most unexpected. She felt numb for a second. Then slowly, the truth started sinking in and it unnerved her more than she realized, for she finally moved and then had to sit down on the bed in the room. Her father came and sat beside her on the edge of the bed. Then slowly, he placed his hands on her shoulders and murmured.

“Speak to me, *beti*! There is no one else here. You can talk to me.”

At his words, Megha looked up at him fully and responded with another question of her own.

“As you said, the answer would seem obvious. Then why do you need to ask me?” The question was in a calm tone. There was no rancor or bitterness in Megha’s voice as she said it.

Her father smiled softly at her before answering. “That is because as I said, I have never imposed anything on you. It might sound incongruous to many in our country that a young girl should at all be consulted about her marriage, but I have treated with more respect than that. Maybe because, having lost your mother at an early age, you and I have been more like partners in the business of daily life! That is one reason but there is also another thing.”

Her father stopped here as if wishing her to ask the question as what the second reason was.

She nodded simply but said not a word. So, her father continued.

“The second reason is somewhat complicated. We have hardly had any time to sit down and talk when we were interrupted by first the royal visit and then this royal proposal. Even the king was gracious enough to concede that it is all a little too much to take in at once and has therefore granted me to take some time over my response. So, here I am, *Beti*. Talk to me.”

Megha was suddenly flustered as if she knew not what to say. “Are you not tired after your long journey, Baba? Maybe you can rest for a while. You had not even eaten anything after you reached here...”

“I am quite okay my dear. I may be getting on in age, but I am not such a frail one yet that I have to go scampering to bed because I have travelled a bit. As for eating, I am sure all I must do is make the request and your good aunt will take care of that. In fact, I can do that. I can ask her to set a plate for me right here and we can even talk while I am filling my belly. But I don’t want to do that. I am somehow not that hungry and even if I was hungry, my instinct tells me that we need to talk. At least you need to and I need to listen. So, let’s get started, without wasting any more time.” The old physician’s voice had become brisk, without losing any of the initial gentleness, by the time this little speech ended.

Despite the somberness of her mood, a few minutes earlier, Megha had to smile. This speech from her father was so much like what she had grown up with since childhood. A gentle, yet brisk, no-nonsense man, he could have easily chosen to remarry when Megha’s mother had died, leaving an infant daughter for him to raise. In fact, he had been expected to go down that route, if not immediately, at least after the specified mourning period had passed. Instead, this resolute man had taken on the responsibilities of a father in the same spirit, he took everything in his life. What had to be done, had to be done. Of course, he had taken the help of paid servants and their kindly neighbours had also done their bit towards the little, motherless girl but never was there any doubt as whose responsibility she always had been. Maybe, it was the shared hardship of their lives, which had forged this extra special bond between father and daughter. Armed with that special understanding of his child’s heart, it had not taken the good man to gauge that Megha’s tears on reuniting with her lost parent held more than just relief and joy. There was also sadness mixed in

those tears and knowing his daughter, he was sure that there must be a definite reason for it. If he was resolute and no-nonsense in his temperament, so was his daughter. He had not raised her to be a whiner, who imagined herself to be more distressed than what fate had decreed her.

So, father and daughter sat down side by side to have their little chat. It was more than a chat for having held herself so long, Megha had a desperate need to, not only outline, but talk of all that she had experienced in the past one year. Starting from the night of her escape from her father's house that fateful night, which seemed so long ago now, she told her story in her own words. Her good aunt tried to interrupt once, urging them to rest but it was obvious that Megha and her father had more than mere chit chat to catch up with and they were left undisturbed after that. It was a long conversation but it relieved Megha's heart that she had finally said it all.

There were still some major questions in their life but there were no more secrets between them. The only challenge now was as how to tackle to the royal question that had been posed to this humble pair by the king of their land!

The tale weavers

“You know, I have always wondered about that moment when Megha must have spoken to the king after his proposal.” Kajal murmured softly.

“So have I. It must have been downright scary, don’t you think so?” Manjula blurted out.

“I should think so. It is not everyday that the king of the land proposes you for marriage and you actually say no.” Kajal reiterated.

“I don’t think, it would have been that dramatic after all.” Sweta countered.

At the look of surprise on the faces of her two friends, she gave a soft laugh and continued her explanation. “Oh! Come on. To begin with, I do not think Megha had to speak to him in person. That hard task would have been undertaken by her father. After all, the king had made the proposal to the girl’s father and it is from him, he would have been expecting a response. Isn’t it?”

Her friends slowly nodded their heads as they acknowledged that it did make sense.

“The more interesting point is as how much they revealed to the king.” Sweta was all serious now.

“Even I wonder about that.” Kajal uttered thoughtfully.

“However, I am quite sure that Megha did not just sit demurely at home, while she let her old father tackle this with the king. She must have accompanied him or at least been beside him, even if she did not blurt out her denial herself.” Manjula protested. She seemed so outraged at this seeming docility, on their fiery Megha’s part ,that her two friends actually burst out laughing.

“Oh cool down, Manju! Don’t get so much worked up. I am sure our Megha didn’t chicken out and let her poor father do it all. She had been so brave throughout. She would hardly play the demure maiden now!” Kajal assured her friend. Manjula, satisfied at this summing up, nodded her head quietly and then smiled. It was obvious that she was smiling at her own enthusiasm.

“Ok, let us get back to the details then. She did not travel to the king’s palace herself, but she wrote a letter, which her father conveyed to the king when he went to meet him the next day. After all, as the bearer of the letter, he declared himself as a messenger, albeit a respected one who could be consulted for his personal advice too.” As usual Sweta had to wrap it up in her own neat and logical way.

“A letter! The written word and its power!” Kajal’s voice was dreamy again.

“Yes, a letter, in which she must have poured out, first her gratitude at the honour offered to her and then her firm but gracious refusal to accept the same!” Manjula summed up.

“Do you think, she would have explicitly spelled out the reason for her refusal or just hinted at it, in a maidenly fashion?” Sweta wanted to know.

“In my opinion, she would have clearly mentioned the reason, though crouched in formal language but stopped just short of spelling out any names. The last would have been a little too brash, even for our strong Megha.” There was no doubt in Manjula’s voice.

“What a pity that we cannot unearth any objective proof of this precious letter.” Kajal said wistfully.

“Hmm...we can only guess at the tone and content of these words and the consequence of them.” Sweta was practical as always but even her voice had a note of longing in it.

A soft collective sigh seemed to escape from the room as the three girls fell silent again. The only sound audible in the room was the sound of the soft but insistent rain relentlessly falling outside.

The tale

Megha was sitting at her favourite place, which was the window sill of her room. Her face was towards the sky visible through the window, but her eyes were closed. Usually, she liked to both listen as well see the rain falling. However, today, she was content to just listen. The gentle murmur of rain continued outside, drenching the pores of the earth. Her heart too felt rather full. It was not just sadness that made her heart heavy. She was feeling the weight of responsibility and decision that was still hers to shoulder. This struggle was not yet ended, her mind told her. There was still a lot of feelings to be felt and a lot of trudging still to be gone through, before she could call this truly ended. It made her feel a little tired but carrying on had become so much a habit that she couldn't have stopped even if she had wanted to.

Her father had given an elaborate narrative of his interview of the king. He had requested a private audience with the king and having been granted the same, had waited patiently while the king had perused Megha's letter. His amused expression at receiving a written document from the girl, he had come to view as his would-be bride, had soon turned to surprise as he read the words penned by her. It had been an anxious period for the old physician as he tried to gauge the young man's mood. Was he angry, offended or just astonished on reading the missive from Megha? He himself had not read the letter though he had a good idea as what Megha wished to convey. Knowing his daughter, he was sure that her words, though couched in politeness, would still be clear and firm. She had never been one to bandy with words or mislead people about her intentions. Simple and unsophisticated she may be but honest and steadfast she always had been and would remain so. In fact, they wouldn't be in this situation in the first place if Megha was anything other than that.

Still, it was the longest few minutes of the old man's life before the king finally finished reading and looked up at him. The amused look was gone from his face. His expression now was inscrutable. He looked directly into the old man's eyes and asked his question.

"Surely, you know who this man is. Would you consider telling me his name?"

"I do, *Maharaj* but I do not think I have the right to disclose it. Only a woman has the right to decide whether she wishes to disclose the name of the man she has given her heart to."

"Absolutely! I would not dream of coercing her, either for marrying me or for that matter even sharing her heart's secret with me, if she doesn't want to."

There had ensued a little silence between the two men then. Then, the king had spoken again. This time, there had been a little more determination in his voice.

"I repeat. There will be no coercion from my side, but you must know. Being a king, after all, does have some privileges."

At this point, Megha's father had not said anything as he could not be sure as where this discussion was going. Sensing his silence, the king had spoken again.

“Sir, I respect you and your daughter too much to force you in anything, but it is really my earnest desire to know who the man is. Please tell your daughter that and let her decide what she wants to do.”

That had been the end of discussion after which her father had been escorted back to her uncle’s house. He had come straight to her room and shared everything with her. He had held nothing back, neither the exact words nor the nuances of the conversation that he had been able to pick up. Then he had left her alone, a silent blessing in his eyes, as he left the momentous decision for her to make.

So Megha now sat pondering about the choice she had, or perhaps did not have, about her next course of action. After all, how much leeway did a commoner really have when the king of her land demanded something from her. It might be just an answer He was seeking but could she really be sure? This so-called gentle coaxing, expressed by the king, might be nothing more than a royal command bathed in colours of politeness and leniency. The sound of gently falling rain was enveloping her in its musical rhythm while her mind sliced and diced the options before her. So, it was a jolt when the door opened. She turned round to see the main servant of the house asking her to come down and meet someone downstairs. Megha had never been a spoilt or a self-centered girl in her entire life. So, much as she would have preferred to enjoy her solitude, while pondering on her uncertain future, she got up immediately. She was taken a little surprised when the same servant girl rushed to ensure that her hair was to be brushed and her appearance made a little tidier than what it was presently. The girl seemed a little more excited than usual but that did not bother Megha very much. The girl was hardly more than a child and it did not take much to excite her. So, she quietly complied and even smiled at the enthusiastic girl to put her at ease. Then she walked down, to her aunt’s room to meet whoever this new guest was.

The first person her eyes fell upon was her father. He had changed his clothes and was sitting facing the visitor, who had her back to her. She had barely the time to recognize the familiar figure when he turned around and their eyes met. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked at the person standing before her, for when he had sensed her entry, he had immediately stood up and faced her.

The reactions of both Megha and Veer were too spontaneous to be affected. It took a few seconds and the gentle cautionary coughing on part of Megha’s father to bring them back to reality. If Megha, despite being embarrassed, was able to lower her eyes quickly and still retain some of her maidenly dignity, the manly Veer did not fare that well. His looking away and attempts to appear unaffected looked downright awkward. So, few more moments had to be allowed to drift away, before a semblance of normalcy could return.

Brought back to the reality, Megha spotted that Veer, in his hand, was holding a small wooden box. Veer saw her looking at it and slowly held it out to her as if gesturing her to take it from him. With puzzled eyes, she looked at him, not sure if she was reading the gesture right. So, Veer finally spoke.

“The king has sent you something. Please accept it.”

Megha's heart sank at these words. Did kings send presents to women who had refused their proposals or was this the royal way of declaring that her refusal didn't really mean anything. In other words, the royal courtship of this maiden would go on as originally planned?

The thought made Megha go cold but what option did she have but to take the box, held out to her? So, she accepted it and was wondering if she was expected to open it right there and then when Veer spoke up again. This time, his voice had a hard edge to it.

"There is a letter in there and I have been instructed to wait for your answer. You can take it to your room and take your time over answering it. If you are not ready to provide it now, you only have to say it. I will come again tomorrow or whenever you ask me to, to take your answer back to him."

This was a further surprise. She was both apprehensive as well as piqued at the same time. However, she nodded quietly, the box clutched lightly in her hand. It was a small, smooth box but still felt like a mini weight in her hand as she turned around to leave the room. It seemed to be obvious to all the people in the room that this was the course of action expected from her. Megha might have felt even more dazed but the intent and questioning eyes of her aunt, which she glimpsed, but for a fraction of seconds sobered her, so that she was able to walk back with more composure than she felt inside her.

Later, the servant girl told Megha that she had come back rather quickly to deliver her response. The young impressionable girl, who had been hovering about the room, also told her something else. She said that Megha, ever since the girl had seen her, had never looked as pretty or as animated, as she had looked when she had returned. There had been a bright glow about her pretty face, the girl said, which as a still-innocent adolescent, the girl unknowingly had been able to identify, as the pure blush of youth, awash with hope and joy.

Her answer had been short and delivered with perfect composure.

"You must come back tomorrow. I should be ready with my answer then." She had practically run out of the room after delivering these words. The servant girl, still hovering around, had been surprised that Megha, instead of walking back to her room, had run out towards the kitchen garden. There had been a skip in her step as she had gone out searching for her faithful Madhav.

The tale weavers

“Of course, it was Madhav!” Kajal exclaimed, before going on. “Who else could craft the memento that Megha would need to send to the king as her response?”

Manjula laughed merrily. Kajal’s enthusiasm was infectious.

“Yes, why not? After all, Madhav had made those pieces before and it was only fitting that Megha would take his help again this time.” Sweta too had absolutely no doubt.

“What a pity that we will never find that letter or the exact piece that Megha had Madhav craft this time for her!” was Manjula’s lament.

“The letter, perhaps not but the piece, maybe, we have already found it or rather seen it’s picture!” Sweta ventured.

“What do you mean?” Kajal demanded.

“You remember the imperfect ring which Megha wears in her portrait? The one on her left hand’s ring finger, whose stones seemed all jumbled up and uneven? In fact, we wondered then as why she was wearing this ring, while rest of her dress and jewels were so perfect. In fact, not only was she wearing it for her portrait, she was even displaying it lovingly. Remember?” Sweta’s voice was all excited as she tried to revive their memory.

“Yes, you are right, Sweta. It had seemed so odd but now we know it was not. It meant something to our Megha. It was, you see, the only token or rather the symbolization of the only token, she had ever had from the man she loved. Those uneven stones jumbled together, they represented the oats! The oats which Veer had left for her, saying it was a gift for her wild pony!” Manjula was speaking slowly, as she articulated this theory. It was obvious that she was making it up or rather realizing the truth, even as she spoke now. Her two friends could only nod in agreement, as they accepted this explanation for the imperfection of the ring and yet the prominence it enjoyed in the portrait. Now that Manjula had described it so, there was no doubt that this was the story behind that imperfect ring.

In a way, it was not just the story of the imperfect ring but also the story of Megha’s love. After all, isn’t that how love really is? Not an exquisite jewel, carved to perfection but an imperfect jumbling of precious emotions that are somehow bound or held together. Yet they manage to decorate one’s life in a pure ,if not always gloriously bright, hue!

“Yes, absolutely! In fact, she was holding up this hand with the other hand, as if precisely showing off this imperfect ring! But of course, to a young girl in love, this imperfect ring is more precious than all those expensive jewels she wears. The necklace of the double pendants is important to her. She wears it to honour the prince or rather the king of the land, who has given it to her, maybe as a wedding present but the imperfect ring is what she got Madhav or maybe some other jeweller to make for her, once she was married to Veer.” Sweta described in her quiet but assured way.

“Yes, in fact , I will tell you something. Megha did run out looking for Madhav but not because she wanted him to make anything for her right then. All she wanted Madhav to do for her at that point of time was to get a handful of oats and maybe the twig of a certain herbal plant. This was the response the king had hinted in his letter which Megha was going to send to him the next day! This so-called imperfect ring, she must have got crafted by Madhav or some other jeweller much later. After all, the other jewellery pieces would also have been created only at a further point of time, maybe when her wedding was finally fixed with Veer.”

Sweta was quite sure of her explanation and so were her two friends.

“Yes, yes, Sweta. You are right. The king, when he heard that Megha did not wish to marry him because she loved someone else, must have done some hard thinking. From his good friend Veer, he had heard how he had left a handful of oats encircled by a twig, on the day of their first meeting. Also, having been close to Veer himself, he must have spotted something in either his own friend or Megha herself which made him suspect the truth. That is what he asked Megha in that letter he sent through Veer that day. If Megha sent him back a bunch of oats and the twig of a certain herbal plant, he would have his suspicion confirmed.”

“Oh! I love this guy, the king I mean. Not only is he magnanimous, he also has quite a sense of humour! To think, he sent Veer, of all people, to carry these messages back and forth. The poor fellow must be feeling so wretched, thinking he is carrying love messages from his king to his would-be queen, while all the time, it was his love and future that was being decided in these messages.” Kajal clapped her hands in happiness. Her beautiful eyes were shining with the sheer mischief of the king’s humour.

“Poor fellow! You seem to be quite sure that he too is in love with Megha by now?” Manjula countered though in an amused tone.

“But of course!” intoned both Sweta and Kajal together and immediately burst out laughing.

“But of course, Manju! That has got to be, Isn’t it? For God’s sake, I am myself, half in laugh with our dear Megha. How can Veer not be?” Kajal clarified, still laughing.

“Any other scenario would be grossly against all the rules of story making.” This was from Sweta.

“I completely agree with your logic, ladies but don’t you find it kind of odd that Veer never said a word while Megha received the marriage proposal and all?” Manjula’s voice had the note which seemed to say that I am convinced but still wish to tie up all the loose ends.

“Oh! I think we can forgive Veer on this slackness. After all that had happened, if the king expresses a desire to wed the girl who had shown such courage and loyalty, it is hardly surprising. Moreover, he had no way of knowing that the beauty in question had the

slightest sentiment for him. Last but not the least, he must have consoled himself that not only was he sacrificing for his dear friend and king, it was also for the better fortune of the girl herself.” Sweta explained.

“Yes, that is right. If the king wants to marry a girl and you have no way of remotely suspecting that the girl in question might have something for you, you would hardly go jumping up and down proclaiming your undying love for her. He is not only the king’s friend but also a proud and dignified individual. What a wonderful surprise it must have been for him when he finally came to know the truth!” Manjula completely agreed with her friends, now that all the bases had been covered.

“So, does the story end? Now that we know that the good king, not only gave up his bride to be but also ensured their happiness by blessing the union?” Manjula continued, almost as if she was asking herself a question.

“In a way, it does and in a way it doesn’t.” This came from Kajal.

Meeting the question in her friends’ eyes, she elaborated.

“The story of how Megha met the prince and found her husband ends here, I suppose. But isn’t every end a new beginning? Megha’s new life began, where she must have continued to love the things she already treasured and hopefully found new things to love and cherish.”

“Yes, a new beginning. Who knows, maybe she ran out in the rain to welcome this new life. Life is a continuous journey and our Megha is the kind who drinks deep of all that life has to offer. Don’t you agree?” Sweta offered. Her eyes were thoughtful as she muttered them. Perhaps she was thinking of the night, when she had sketched the face of Megha , even before she had seen the actual portrait found in the attic. She was thinking of that eager, animated look, she had herself put in the eyes of the girl, whose hands she had drawn as stretching out towards something, which even then she had felt sure, was the falling rain. Always the rain! The gentle rain, the relentless rain, the steady rain!

For a moment, all three girls were silent, as if lost in their own thoughts. Perhaps they were all thinking of the story which they had spun out over the last few days. A simple, predictable story some would say but it had always felt true to them. More so, as they had fleshed it out more and more, so that they could almost feel Megha’s thoughts, her despair and finally her joy as she achieved her own happy ending.

“Maybe that is how novelists feel when they have spun out a story. A sense of fulfilment but also a sense of emptiness. Now that we finally know what happened, there is a sense of climax, of end!” Sweta said after a few minutes of silence. There was a flatness to her voice, which jarred on the somberness of the mood that had built up in the room. Manjula made no protest but oddly enough the contradiction came from the dreamy Kajal.

“I have heard of another theory where sometimes novelists claim that they are confronted with a story that literally pushes itself, so that they have no other choice but to tell it. The fleshing out of the story is not something, which they claim *they* do but rather something they are *forced to* do! As if they are just the mouthpiece, the channel for it to come out, not the creators!”

This comment was met by silence although complete silence was nothing but an anomaly in this house. Like always, their conversation had the gentle slush of falling rain as its background score. A sound, both soft but also tense and relentless, like it had a mission which it was carrying out with its steady and persistent rhythm.

“You are going to talk about this house being haunted again!” Manjula murmured in a soft voice.

“Yes, it is haunted but not by something sinister! It is haunted by the happiness which was experienced within this space. The innocent, pure happiness of a girl who had the grace and wisdom to appreciate what life offered her.” Came Kajal’s answer.

“Yes, she was not some great queen who could dictate her tale to bards. But there was one thing, she loved very much and she consciously or unconsciously entrusted her tale to the that thing.”

“Rain! The gentle love of Megha’s life!” Kajal murmured.

“Yes! Rain! The cool and steady rain of these hills which Megha had always loved. For her, it was not just water pouring from the skies, it was like her friend. It listened to everything, not just what Megha spoke but also what she felt and held it within itself. Every time it rains, Megha’s story comes alive! We think, we are just passing our time, cooking up a story on a rainy day but actually rain narrates the tale and we are only the mouthpiece.” There was an odd note of conviction in Sweta’s practical voice.

“If you are an artist like Atul or Sweta, it finds its way onto the canvass, in form of Megha’s picture. If you are a simple village child of pure mind, the whole story just floats into your dream, like it did for little Lali.” Manjula’s voice had the same conviction as Sweta.

“Even Kunal the sceptic was not spared. Even he *knew* the story, as if someone had narrated the whole thing to him.” Kajal gave a soft, amused laugh as she commented on her husband. Her voice, while holding a note of wonder in it was also mixed with a chiding fondness for her husband, as she made this comment.

“So, was it Megha’s tale or the rain’s tale?” Sweta wanted to know.

“Both! Megha’s tale, narrated by rain!” Manjula could not help but summarize it in her characteristic neat way.

Slowly, each of the three girls got up to stand by the window. They watched the beautiful rain washing the hillsides around the house. In their mind's eyes, they could feel the freshness of all that this rain would nourish and bring forth from the soil.

This little corner of the world had narrated its simple tale to its visitors and was contented to leave it at that. No further eulogy was needed, the gentle, sound of rain seemed to say.

So, the last afternoon of their vacation passed, as these three city girls stood quietly, absorbing the music pouring down from the heavens above.

The tale

Megha tiptoed out to the balcony outside her bedroom. It had started to rain some time back. It was still some time before dawn would break and she was glad of this chance to have a few moments of her own. Her life now was a lot busier. A wife and mother, who also continued to assist her father in sorting medicines and herbs whenever she could, Megha's life was a packed one. It was also packed with happiness, a strong sense of purpose and most importantly, gratitude for the little joys that life threw her way. The sound of rain, as it trickled through her outstretched palms, was one such joy that she still savoured.

She breathed deep of the cool, rain drenched air as she cupped her two hands together to let the water flow into them. Of course, she was not trying to stop or store it away. Her palms were nothing more than a gentle halt for the falling droplets, as they continued their journey downwards.

A thoughtful smile appeared on her lips as she remembered her friend's visit the previous day. Vasudha had finally made good her promise of visiting and spending a day with Megha and her baby. Soon to be married now, Vasudha had brought numerous gifts for the baby but from her friend Megha, she had asked only for a promise, while handing her a strange object. Less of a gift, rather more of a token for safekeeping. The small wooden doll which Megha had been hiding in her bosom and which she had then discovered to be lost, the night Vasudha simply disappeared from their safe house.

How different their relationship was now! No longer was one a held captive and the other a jailor but two girls who shared more than a common history. A beautiful friendship had grown between the two of them. If the young girl had suffered any disappointment at Megha's marrying Veer, who had initially been proposed for Vasudha, she was well past over it. In fact, she had assured Megha that nothing definite had ever been promised. She loved to tease her friend and her husband that she, owing to her uncanny intelligence, had actually been the first person to guess as where the wind lay. If only, the king had asked her right away, there would have been no need to play all those games with poor Veer and Megha and those oats! The two girls had laughed and joked about this thing until even the baby had started sharing their merriment.

However, their conversation had not been all fun and jokes, for Vasudha had shared the story of her former admirer, whose token the strange wooden doll had been. As a young and sensitive girl, the incident of her finding the doll that night and the eventual sequence of events that followed, had made a deep impact on her. It pained Megha to listen as how Vasudha's former admirer had first pleaded and then tried to coerce her to comply to his wishes, failing which he had forcibly carried her off to the king's enemies. That had set off the chain of events which finally resulted in the imprisonment of the plotting prime minister and Vasudha's rescue. Megha's face sobered as she realized how dangerous her situation had been that night and later, as she had trekked all by herself to her uncle's house. Anything could have happened. She might have got hopelessly lost or even been spotted by any of the king's enemies. With Vasudha as their captive, Megha's cover had obviously been blown. Yet, no such thing had happened. Instead, a safe and sound albeit a heavy

hearted Megha, had found her way back to her family, where her life had taken another unexpected turn some days later.

All these played in Megha's mind as she continued to stand there, enjoying the melody of the rain in her ears and its delicious coolness on the palms of her hands.

It is quite a wonderful story, Megha thought, but it shall be forgotten. Of course, she would tell the story to her little daughter when she was older and to all other kids God would bless her with! They in their turn might pass on the story, along with their own stories, to their own kids but still Megha felt a little wistful. She was no grand queen whose tale the bards would sing. She was just a humble, brave-spirited young woman, who had been confronted with an extraordinary situation that had somehow culminated in a happy ending for her. Still, some deep emotion raged in her heart as she thought of all this.

Sound of sudden thunder and a quickening of the rain water that flowed over her hands brought her back to the reality. What had started as a gentle drizzle had now strengthened into a thick downpour. So heavy was the falling rain that it had created almost a mist like sheet in front of her eyes.

At that moment, inspiration struck Megha. But of course! She exclaimed in her heart, as the truth, like the falling rain, washed over her. The story would always be alive for it was the story of Megha. Rain, the relentless rain of these hills would hold it in its moist folds and narrate it to whoever was willing to listen. Her feelings, her emotions and above all ,her joy in the beauty of rain would preserve the tale. These hills, the wind and even her body when it went it back to the elements would hold it and release it to the right recipients!

To a little girl, in a lovely dream. Revealed to an artist as a work of art and finally as a well-rounded tale to a bevy of tale weavers!

It was the tale of a girl, who loved the rains, entrusted to the eternal rains.

END